

NYPL RESEARCH LIBRARIES



3 3433 08252585 2

NAS

Bacon



Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2007 with funding from
Microsoft Corporation

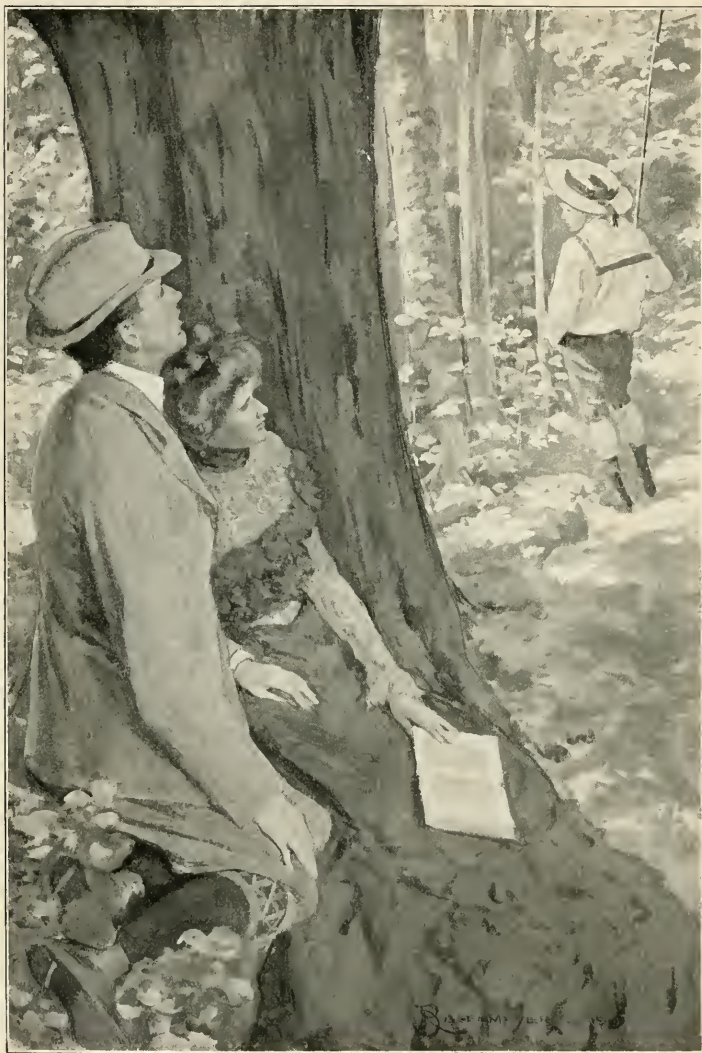
<http://www.archive.org/details/impangel00baco>

NAS

Bacon

THE NEW YORK
PUBLIC LIBRARY

ASTOR, LENOX AND
TILDEN FOUNDATIONS
R L



He looked back once or twice hesitatingly, but they did not call him.

THE IMP
AND THE
ANGEL

By

Josephine Dodge Daskam

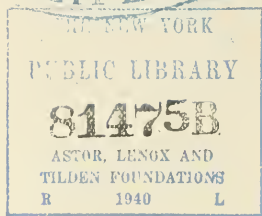
ILLUSTRATED BY

Bernard J. Rosenmeyer

CLC

NEW YORK
CHARLES SCRIBNER'S SONS

1901



*Copyright, 1901, by
Charles Scribner's Sons*

Published October, 1901

THE CAXTON PRESS
NEW YORK.

To
J . S . D .
Kind Sponsor to the Author
and
Good Friend to the Imp
These Stories are
Dedicated

CONTENTS

	PAGE
<i>The Imp and the Angel,</i>	<i>1</i>
<i>The Imp and the Drum,</i>	<i>23</i>
<i>The Imp and the Author,</i>	<i>49</i>
<i>The Imp's Matinée,</i>	<i>71</i>
<i>The Imp's Christmas Dinner,</i>	<i>93</i>
<i>The Imp Disposes,</i>	<i>125</i>
<i>The Prodigal Imp,</i>	<i>151</i>

ILLUSTRATIONS

FACING
PAGE

<i>He looked back once or twice hesitatingly, but they did not call him,</i>	<i>Frontispiece</i>
<i>“Look out, Algy!” he said dutifully, “this is my second suit!”</i>	12
<i>“As they went round, till every girl was lifted out,”</i>	46
<i>The audience waited with dogged patience for twenty minutes,</i>	76
<i>“They can’t play for one boy—they simply can’t,” said the man,</i>	80
<i>So he lurked on the outside of the ring that always surrounded her,</i>	132
<i>“One for the City,” he said,</i>	158
<i>He wept quietly on her white lawn shoulder, . . .</i>	166

THE IMP
AND THE
ANGEL

THE IMP AND THE ANGEL

EVERY morning after breakfast, when the Imp trotted down the steps of the broad hotel piazza, with his brown legs bare, and his big iron shovel—none of your ten-cent tin scoops for him!—he was filled anew with pity for Algernon Marmaduke Schuyler. This young man sat gloomily by his nurse—fancy a boy of eight with a nurse!—and pretended to amuse himself by staring at the beachful of bathers and the gentlemen diving from the float. He wore a white duck sailor-suit with blue trimmings, and he was never seen without his rubbers. Once a day, in the middle of the afternoon, he was taken down to the water in a little blue bath-robe, and guarded carefully from the shore while he played, for ten minutes by the watch, in the shallow water.

To-day the sun was under a cool gray cloud, and Mrs. Schuyler had forbidden him to leave the piazza.

“Stay with Emma, my angel, and play quietly,”

The Imp and the Angel

she said. "You know, he is not strong," turning to the Imp's mother, who looked pityingly at the white-faced little fellow in the long, tight trousers, and gave the Imp an extra kiss as he hopped down the steps.

"Back for dinner!" she called after him, and he waved the shovel to show her he understood, and made for a secluded corner of the beach, where his greatest achievement in the line of forts was rising proudly to its third story.

Tracy McIntyre, a very good boy in his way, though a little domineering, turned up before long, and they pottered away at the fort, and buried themselves to the waist in the cool, damp sand, and squabbled a little and made it up again, and dared each other to venture out farther and farther (without wetting the small rolled-up trousers), until finally an unexpected wave, a little bigger and wetter than its brothers, soaked them both to the waist, and they retreated into the fort, squealing with terror and delight. At this point, three shrill notes on a dog-whistle summoned Tracy back, and the Imp went with him, partly for company, partly because the wave had left him feeling rather damp and sticky. It was later than

The Imp and the Angel

they had thought, and they found the ladies, from the cottages sprinkled about, already gathered on the piazza, which meant that luncheon was ready.

As they tried to escape notice by slipping behind people, the Imp ran into Algernon Marmaduke Schuyler, who was staring so hard at the two that he had neglected to get out of their way. His mother was upon them in an instant. While they stood twisting and wriggling, and terribly alarmed at being noticed so much—for all the ladies were looking at them—Mrs. Schuyler smoothed Algernon's hair and said severe things about dirty little boys who got others into trouble, and who were not content to get chills and pneumonia themselves, but must give these unpleasant things to careful little children who did not endanger their health by getting soaked to the waist every day of their lives.

The Imp did not like Mrs. Schuyler at all—indeed, few people did. She was very stiff and very much dressed and very critical, and seemed to have no sympathy at all for boys on rainy days when they stamped a little in the halls. So he was greatly relieved when his friend the old doctor spoke in his defence.

The Imp and the Angel

“Chills, madam? Pneumonia?” said the gruff old man. “Not a bit of it! Not a bit of it! Send your boy out with them and make a man of him: he’s white as a potato sprout! Let him get a knock or two, and he won’t tumble over so easily!” He shoved the Imp and Tracy out of the way, and they ran up to where reproaches and clean clothes waited for them. He was a famous old man, and he was not to be contradicted, so Mrs. Schuyler only smiled, and said her angel was a little too delicate for such rough treatment, and the matter passed off without further notice.

But all through his potato and mutton the Imp gazed steadily at Algernon Marmaduke Schuyler. How white his face was—as white as a potato sprout! How dull his life must be! Tied to a nurse all day—none of that privacy so necessary to the carrying out of a thousand fascinating plans; dressed so tightly and whitely; taking so many naps and getting nothing but mush and eggs to eat—how horrible the summer must seem to him! The Imp had more friends than he could remember, and was making new ones every day; but who played with “his mother’s angel”? Katy, the chambermaid, did not bring the darling little

The Imp and the Angel

mice in the trap for *him* to see ; Annie, the cook, did not beckon *him* to her with warm molasses cookies ; Fritz, the bathing-master, did not swim out to sea with *him* on his broad brown shoulders. What was such a boy like ? The Imp determined to see for himself, and after dinner, when Mrs. Schuyler had gone up for her nap, and Algernon was waiting to be taken up for his, the nurse was astounded to see a jolly, brown little boy approach her charge and open conversation with a cheerful “Hullo !”

“Hullo !” replied Algernon politely.

“Do you want to see my fort ?” inquired the Imp.

Algernon nodded eagerly, but the nurse shook her head. “Master Algy must have his nap now,” she said ; and that would have ended the matter, probably, if the nurse had not noticed the clerk waving a bunch of letters at her. “Oh, that’s the mail !” she cried. “You just wait here a jiffy, Master Algy, till I get it,” and the boys were alone.

“Where is your fort ?” asked the Angel quickly. “Could we see it before she gets back ?”

The Imp looked doubtful.

The Imp and the Angel

"I guess not," he said ; "it's quite a ways. She won't be a minute."

"Yes, she will," insisted the Angel, "she stays and talks. Is it over there?"

The Imp nodded. "Just behind the bath-houses," he said.

Now, whether it was that Algernon wished to exhibit a courage he did not feel, or whether he was really reckless, will never be known ; but he seized the Imp's hand, and they had trotted down the side steps before Emma had fairly taken the letters in her hand. They went too fast to talk, and only when they were settled in the sand behind the double row of bath-houses did the Imp begin to make acquaintance.

"Do you like to take naps?" he inquired curiously, as Algernon seized the shovel and began to dig violently, as if to make up for all the days on the piazza.

"No," replied his mother's angel, shortly.

The Imp waited, but he said nothing more.

"Do you like your trousers tight that way?" pursued the Imp.

"No," replied the Angel again, continuing his excavations.

The Imp and the Angel

“Don’t you like cookies?” The Imp gave him one more chance to explain himself.

“Yes,” said the Angel, while the sand flew about him, and that was all.

Not a talkative fellow, evidently, but a good worker. There was already sand enough for a tower, and so the Imp asked no more questions, but set to work in a business-like manner. He was only doing what he did every day, and he was utterly unconscious of the terror that he might be causing in Emma’s breast. He did not know that the frightened nurse was running wildly up the beach in search of the fort, taking precisely the wrong direction; and though Algernon was far less talkative than Tracy McIntyre, he was a good play-fellow, and the Imp actually forgot, after a few minutes, that they had come out under rather unusual circumstances and had not intended to stay long.

Just as the tower was done, the Imp, glancing up, saw far down the beach a little crowd of men running out a row-boat. He had dragged the Angel to his feet in a moment and was starting down the beach after them. The Angel could not run very fast, owing to his tight trousers, which flapped out at the ankles over his little ties,

The Imp and the Angel

and it occurred to the Imp that they could run much better barefooted. He proposed this to his friend, who hesitated a moment.

“Will I get a cold?” he asked doubtfully.

“Course not, no!” said the Imp impatiently, tugging at his tennis-shoes.

Algernon looked back at the hotel and wavered. Then a look of determination came over his little pale face, and sitting down by the Imp, he took off first his shiny rubbers, and then his ties and blue stockings. As his feet touched the damp, fresh sand, he sighed deeply and wiggled his toes down into it.

“I will never wear my shoes again,” he announced solemnly. The Imp stared.

“No,” repeated the Angel, “I will not,” and before the Imp could stay him, he had lifted up the little bundle and pitched it, stockings and all, into a great hole just ahead of them, above the tide-line, where the beach garbage was collected and burned. Well, well! There was something in this Algernon Marmaduke Schuyler, after all! So thrilled was the Imp by the independent spirit of his new friend that he forgot, or at least failed to remember seriously enough, that a certain old

The Imp and the Angel

wreck, not far away, half under the sand, marked the limits of his wanderings, and that he was supposed to play between that goal and the hotel. The sun came out suddenly, and the whole sea gleamed like a big looking-glass. The air was soft and warm, the sand firm and good to the feet, and life seemed very full and pleasant to the Imp. He bounded along with big jumps over the beach, sometimes prying out shells and pebbles with his toes, sometimes skipping stones, sometimes for pure joy punching Algernon, who promptly punched him back, and utterly amazed the Imp by his actions.

For if the day and the sea and the freedom seemed good to the healthy, active little Imp, what was it to the Angel? No fresh-air child from a city mission was ever more drunk with delight than he. He danced more wildly than the Imp; he sat down in the sand and spun around many times, to the great detriment of his white trousers; he cast off his cap and threw sand about until his hair was full of it; he rolled up his trousers as far as he could, and waded in the water with an excitement the Imp could not understand. Of course the water felt good; of course it gave you

The Imp and the Angel

a queer, creepy feeling as you went in higher and higher; of course there was a delicious fear in suddenly sliding on a slippery stone—but that was what one came to the beach for. There was no need to shout and gasp and laugh and jump all the time. Finally the Angel began to throw water about, and then the Imp felt that he must draw the line.

“Look out, Algy!” he said, dutifully, “this is my second suit!”

But Algy continued to throw, and rather than suffer insult the Imp promptly retaliated. It grew very exciting, and they dashed along by the side of the water, stamping it as hard as they could, and finally gloriously tumbling down and recklessly rolling over and over in the warm, frothy seaweed, where the little waves started to run back again.

As they lay luxuriously resting, the Imp explained that according to a strictly enforced rule, he might ruin one suit of clothes a day and a change would be forthcoming, but that when he returned with the second suit wet as far as the waist, at that hour he must retire to bed, bread and milk being his only supper.



“Look out, Algy!” he said dutifully, “this is my second suit!”

THE NEW YORK
PUBLIC LIBRARY

ASTOR LENOX AND
TILDEN FOUNDATIONS
R L

The Imp and the Angel

“An’ this is ’way above my waist,” he added cheerfully, “an’ yours is wet as sop !”

The Angel glanced at his dripping duck and proudly agreed that it was. “I ’ll get noomony, I guess,” he volunteered, after a few moments of happy silence, during which they watched the gulls wheel above them, and wriggled about on the warm, wet seaweed.

“Tracy and me don’t get noomony,” murmured the Imp sleepily, for the sun and the dancing on the beach had made him drowsy, “but you might, maybe. My mother says you ’d be better if you played more, and did n’t wear such nice clothes. You ’re white as a potato sprout—”

“So ’re you !” retorted the Angel, hotly. “My clothes are *not* nice, either ! You need n’t say so !”

The Imp was getting ready for a crushing retort when a strong smell of burning wood came to his keen little nose. The wind had changed, and he felt a little cool, too ; so he shook off what water he could, and without reply climbed up the bank of straggling sand-grass which had hidden them effectually from the hotel and the frightened Emma, and looked about him. The Angel

The Imp and the Angel

followed at his heels, tearing his jacket from shoulder to shoulder on a sharp projecting stone, and they burst into a cry of joy, for there, not five minutes' run away, was a noble bonfire. They wasted no words, but ran rapidly toward it, and found themselves in an enchanting scene.

The fire was a fine large one, and well under way. It was of driftwood and large empty boxes, heaped up scientifically and stuffed with straw below. Behind it was a small, dingy white cottage, with a boat drawn up under the low eaves, and many fishing-rods and lines and corks and sinkers tangled together lay about. A big black collie bounded round and round the blaze, and three children hopped after him, while an older boy, who looked half ashamed of playing at such a game in such company, fed the fire nevertheless, and thoroughly enjoyed himself.

The Imp advanced with his usual ease of manner, and the Angel followed. "Hullo!" he said. The older boy paid no attention, but put a piece of wood over a blazing spot in a careful way intended to convey the fact that he was tending this fire as a sacred duty and not for idle amusement. The little girl, who was barefooted and dressed in

The Imp and the Angel

a funny little red jersey, only put her thumb in her mouth and retreated behind the fire. But the smaller of the two little boys smiled in a friendly way and returned the Imp's greeting.

"Can I put some wood on?" the Angel asked suddenly. Evidently he was not used to playing with boys. The Imp would have led up to this request by easy stages, and he was afraid his friend had been too precipitate; but the proprietors of the bonfire took the request in good part, and politely picked out the biggest bit for the Angel to handle. Trembling with excitement, he carefully placed it upon an exposed part of the heap, and smudged his wet trousers terribly in so doing. A piece was gravely handed to the Imp, who nearly fell into the middle of the blaze in his attempt to place his offering in the very best position, and won the deep admiration of the little girl by the bravery with which he bore a small burn on his little finger. Their hosts were jolly, freckled fellows, barelegged and with somewhat ragged garments, but the best of playmates; and when the little girl confided to the Imp that there were potatoes buried in the ashes he felt that his cup was full.

The Imp and the Angel

This was the kind of thing one dreamed of : to come, wet and draggled, upon a sudden brilliant bonfire ; to dance barelegged and happy in the fascinating glow ; to poke it with sticks and feed it as occasion required ; to fish out the hot and delicious potatoes, burst their ashy skins, and sprinkle salt, which the little girl brought from the cottage, upon them—this was well worth a supper in bed ! And the Imp and the Angel confided to the big boy, whose name was Alf, and who grew more social as one got to know him better, that they would, if he wished, sever all connection with their families and live there with him and his brothers forever round the bonfire. They were quite dry and warm now, with the heat of the fire and the dancing ; and the bright sun and the shining water with the white ships scattered over it far away, the comfortable, fishy cottage—what a home for a boy that must be !—with the nets and the dog, the ring of dancing brothers and sisters, and the smell of the seaweed and the smoke and the potatoes, all made an impression upon the Imp that never faded quite away. It was the happiest, freest, heartiest time he had ever had—all the better for its delicious

The Imp and the Angel

unexpectedness. The cottage and the fire had sprung up like a fairy-book adventure, and delight had followed delight till there was nothing left for heart to want. The sea stretched away before them: the boundless sea, with its miles of white, firm beach, and red clouds about the sun. Perhaps all down the beaches there were fires and potatoes and dogs and boys awaiting young adventurers! The little girl had shyly offered him the most beautiful pink-lined shell he had ever seen, and as he put it into his bulging hip-pocket the Imp was probably as happy as he was destined to be in all his life.

He did not even have time to grow tired of it, for Alf suggested that persons planning to get back to the hotel before dark had better be going soon, and so, after one more wild dance hand in hand about the fire, when they all fell down and rolled in the cold embers at the edges, they separated, and the adventurers left the fire still at its brightest, with the children and the dog still running about, and continually looking back at that happy place, they went slowly up the beach.

Algernon Marmaduke Schuyler was dazed with happiness and excitement. His face was burned

The Imp and the Angel

to a brilliant red, his hair was full of splinters and sand, his hands were grimy, and his sailor-suit was a wreck. But he stepped out like a man, and was perfectly silent with joy, thinking of the two enormous potatoes he had eaten, and the handful of dried beef Alf had given him, besides the bit of black licorice. This was life, indeed! Would one who had tasted such a day go tamely back to a piazza?

They had rounded the old wreck before a word was spoken. Boys do not need to make conversation when they are too happy for words; that is reserved for the unfortunate grown-up ones. So they trotted on in silence, and because the Angel's shoes and stockings were at the bottom of the hole the Imp did not stop to put on his, though they were safely stuffed in his trousers pockets.

They approached the piazza from the side, but they did not accomplish their object, for it was crowded with people. The Imp's inquiring eyes first peeked around the corner, and he was seized by Mrs. Schuyler before his head was fairly visible.

"You naughty little Perry Stafford, where is

The Imp and the Angel

Algy? Where is my angel?" she cried, frightened and angry. He did not need to answer, for Algernon stepped forward, and at the sight of that youth, ragged, dirty, and barelegged, the people on the piazza burst into laughter.

Nor did the Angel care a rap for them. Too full of his happiness to remember to be afraid, he fell into his mother's arms, babbling excitedly of a fire and a dog and fishing-rods and lines.

"I had two great big potatoes—two! And dried-up beef, and some black lickerish! I wriggled m' toes into the sand, and I can jump farther than him!" he gasped, indicating the Imp, who tried to flee from his mother's accusing eyes and get into the bed that was even now awaiting him.

"Dried beef! licorice! Oh, heavens!" cried Mrs. Schuyler. "Algernon, how did you *dare*? You will be sick for weeks! You are in a fever now!"

She clasped him to her in terror, but old Dr. Williams advanced and pulled him away.

"Nonsense, nonsense, Mrs. Schuyler!" said he, sharply, but with his eyes full of laughter. "He's no more fever than I have this minute. Stand up,

The Imp and the Angel

sir, and tell your mother that that's good, honest sunburn, that you never were so well in your life, and that a few more days with the Imp, here, will make another man of you! Dried beef and licorice and dirt in the sun will do him more good than tight clothes in the shade, madam; I can assure you of that!"

And with this, the longest speech that he had made during the summer, the famous doctor slapped the Angel's shoulder, and tweaked the Imp's ear. "Get along with you!" he said gruffly, and they ran out of the room together, the nurse bringing up the rear.

"Do you suppose he 'll play with Tracy and me to-morrow, muvver?"

The Imp said *muvver* from habit, not necessity, and he was lying, clean and penitent, in his bed, with the empty bread and milk bowl on the floor beside them.

His mother's mouth trembled a little at the corners.

"I should n't be surprised if he did," she answered. "You see, the doctor said it would be good for him; and probably, *if he takes great care not to go beyond the old wreck on any account,*

The Imp and the Angel

and not to bathe with his clothes on, he will be allowed to play with any boys who observe the same rules."

And it turned out, as it usually did, that she was right.

THE IMP AND THE DRUM

THE IMP AND THE DRUM

IT never would have happened but for Miss Eleanor's mission class. Once a week through the winter she went in the cars to a town not far from the city, where there were a great many mills, but few schools, and talked to a crowd of the mill-hands' little children. She did not give them lessons, exactly, but she told them stories and sang songs with them and interested them in keeping themselves and their homes clean and pretty. They were very fond of her and were continually bringing in other children, so that after the first year she gave up the small room she had rented and took them up two flights into an old dancing-hall, a little out of the centre of the town.

The Imp had been from the beginning deeply interested in this scheme, and when he learned that many of the boys were just exactly eight and a half—his own age—and that they played all sorts of games and told stories and sang songs,

The Imp and the Drum

and had good times generally, his interest and excitement grew, and every Thursday found him begging his mother or big aunty, with whom they spent the winter, to telephone to his dear Miss Eleanor that this time he was to accompany her and see all those fascinating children : big Hans, who, though fourteen, was young for his years and stupid ; little Olga, who was only eleven, but who mothered all the others, and had brought more children into the class than anyone else ; Pierre, who sang like a bird, and wore a dark-blue jersey and a knitted cap pulled over his ears ; red-headed Mike, who was all freckles and fun ; and pretty, shy Elizabeth, with deep violet eyes and a big dimple, who was too frightened to speak at first, and who ran behind the door even now if a stranger came.

But it was not till the Imp gave up being eight and a half and arrived at what his Uncle Stanley called quarter of nine that Miss Eleanor decided that he might go, if his mother would let him.

“I used to think,” she said, “that it would n’t be wise to take him. I thought they ’d feel awkward ; for of course he ’s better dressed, and I don’t want them to feel that they ’re being

The Imp and the Drum

shown off or made an exhibition of, even to a child. But I know them so well now, and I've told them about him and how he loves to play games, and wants to come, and I think it may really be a good thing—for both sides."

So on one delicious Thursday in early February, the Imp boarded the train proudly, and they steamed out of the big station. He had gone over the entire afternoon, in anticipation, with Harvey, his little lame friend, who could not go to school, but did his lessons with a tutor, and with whom the Imp studied every morning during the three or four months they spent in the city; and Harvey was as interested as he, and sent his best love to them all.

From the moment of the Imp's entrance, when his cheerful "Hullo!" made him any number of friends, and his delight at being there made them all delighted to have him, he was a great success; and when big Hans, with a furtive glance at the Imp's clean hands, went quietly off to the ever-ready basin and washed his own, Miss Eleanor regretted that she had not brought him sooner.

When they had finished the story about Washington at Valley Forge—for Miss Eleanor was

The Imp and the Drum

quietly teaching them history—she got them into a long line that reached quite around the room, and went out for a moment, returning with a drum in her hand: not a play drum, but a real one, with polished black sticks and a fascinating strap to cross over the shoulder.

“Now,” said she, “we’re going to learn the fire-drill, and we’ll take turns at the drum.”

The children were delighted, and stood still as mice while she explained the order of affairs. In the big city public schools, she had been told, they practised going out in line at a mock alarm of fire, and the boy or girl who broke out of line or dashed for the door before the drum-tap was disgraced for days in the eyes of the school. Everything must be quiet and in order; every child must have his place and take it; no one must cry out, or run ahead, or push, or try to hurry matters; and what was most important, all must keep step—which was why the drum came to be there.

She arranged them carefully: little ones first, then girls, last of all the boys, with big Hans at the rear, and Olga managing a crowd of the little ones.

The Imp and the Drum

“Now,” she said, “we won’t leave the room this first time ; we ’ll just march round and round till we can all keep step, and later we ’ll practise going through the halls and down-stairs. I ’ll drum the first time, and then the best boy shall be drummer.”

The friend who had suggested the fire-drill when Miss Eleanor had begged her for some new game to play, had never seen one, and did not know the exact details, but she knew the general idea of it, and she knew, too, that it was not at all easy for people to keep in step, even to a drum. This had surprised Miss Eleanor greatly. She supposed that anybody could keep step, and she was much inclined to doubt her friend’s statement that a large number of grown people, even, found it difficult.

But there was a still greater surprise in store for her. When she slung the strap over her pretty red waist and hit the drum a resounding blow, a very different sound from what she had expected was the result—a muffled, flat noise, with nothing inspiring about it whatever. She bit her lip and tried again, the children watching her attentively from the sides of the big room.

The Imp and the Drum

Bang !

Bang !

Bang, bang, bang !

A few feet began to keep time, but the sound was not very different from that produced by a stick hit against the wall, and big Hans, whose father played in a band, and who had attended many rehearsals—it was from him the drum had been procured—shook his head solemnly.

“Not so ! Not so !” he said in his thick, gruff voice. “You no hit good ! You no hit hard !”

“Oh, Hans, can *you* play it ?” cried Miss Eleanor eagerly. “Here, take it !” And she flung the strap over his shoulder.

Hans shambled out to the centre of the room, and struck a mighty blow. The familiar deep sound of a drum filled the place, and Miss Eleanor sighed with relief, but alas ! her joy was short-lived, for poor Hans had no idea of time, and could only pound away like a hammer. In vain she held his hand and tried to guide his strokes. The noise was deafening, but no more to be marched to than thunder.

Little Pierre tried next, but though he kept perfect time, and looked very cunning in his little

The Imp and the Drum

blue blouse, his taps were too light to cover the sound of the tramping feet.

Miss Eleanor's cheeks were red with vexation. Her arm ached, and the children were getting restless. She did not know what to do.

"Oh, dear! *Who* would have thought it was so hard?" she exclaimed pathetically. And then she noticed the Imp, who was fairly holding his lips in his effort to keep silence. For he had solemnly promised his mother not to put himself forward, nor suggest anything, nor offer to do a single thing till he was asked, on pain of never coming again.

"What is it, Perry?" she asked.

"*I* can—*I* can play a drum, Miss Eleanor!" he burst out.

She looked doubtful: the Imp was given to thinking that he could do most things.

"This is n't a play drum, you know, dear; it's a real one," she said.

"But I can play a real one. Truly I can! Mr. Archer taught me—he was a truly drummer-boy in the war; he showed me how. He said I could hit it up like a good 'un!" the Imp exploded again.

Miss Eleanor dimly remembered that among

The Imp and the Drum

the Imp's amazing list of acquaintances, a one-legged Grand Army man, who kept a newspaper-stall, had been mentioned, and decided that it could do no harm to let him try.

"Well, put it on," she said, and the Imp proudly assumed the drum, grasped the sticks loosely between his fingers, wagged his head knowingly from side to side, and began.

Brrrm !

Brrrm !

Brrrm ! brrrm ! brrrm !

The straggling line straightened, the children began to grin, and little Pierre, at the head of the line, stamped his foot and started off. Miss Eleanor's forehead smoothed, and she smiled encouragingly at the Imp.

"That 's it, that 's it !" she cried delightedly. "How easy it looks !"

But the Imp stopped suddenly, and the moving line stopped with him.

"Wait ! I forgot !" he said peremptorily. "You must n't start till I do this."

And with a few preliminary taps he gave the long roll that sends a pleasant little thrill to the listener's heart.

The Imp and the Drum

Brrrm !

Brrrm !

Brrrrr-um dum !

The children jumped with delight, and the line started off, the Imp drumming for dear life around the inside of the big square, and Miss Eleanor keeping the hasty ones back and hurrying the stragglers, trying to make big Hans feel the rhythm, and suppressing Pierre's happy little skips.

After a half-hour of this they begged to try the halls and stairs, and the Imp stood proudly on the landings, keeping always at about the middle of the line, stamping his right foot in time with his sticks, his eyes shining with joy, his little body straight as a dart.

Miss Eleanor was delighted. The boys responded so well to her little talk on protecting the girls and waiting till they were placed before taking their own stand in the line, the girls stood so straight, the little ones entered so well into the spirit of the thing, that she felt that afternoon to have been one of the best they had had, and confided as much to 'the Imp on their journey home.

The Imp and the Drum

As for the Imp, he had a new interest in life, and talked of little else than the fire-drill for days. There was no question as to his going the next Thursday, and he and his drum formed the chief attraction of the day, for the drill proved the most popular game of all, and after the proclamation had gone forth that none but clean-handed, neatly dressed, respectful boys need aspire to head the line, such boys were in a great and satisfying majority.

For a month they had been practising regularly, and by the end of that time every child knew his place and took it instantly at the opening tap. It was pretty to see little Olga shake back her yellow pigtails and marshal her tiny brood into line ; even the smallest of them kept step nicely now. Only big Hans could not learn, and Pierre walked by his side in vain, trying to make him feel the rhythm of the Imp's faithful drumsticks.

There was one feature of the drill that amused Miss Eleanor's friends greatly. Of course there was no fire-alarm in the old hall, and she would not let anyone cry out or even pretend for a moment that there was any real danger. She merely called sharply, "*Now !*" when they were

The Imp and the Drum

to form, and it was one of the suppressed excitements of the afternoon to wait for that word. They never knew when it would come.

For Miss Eleanor's one terror was fire. Twice, as a little girl, she had been carried out of a burning house ; and the flames bright against the night, the hoarse shouts of the firemen, the shock of the frightened awakening, and the chill of the cold winter air had so shaken her nerves that she could hardly bear to remember it. Burglars had little terror for her ; in accidents she was cool and collected ; more than once, in a quiet way, she had saved people from drowning ; but a bit of flaming paper turned her cheeks white and made her hands tremble. So though big Hans begged to be allowed to call out " Fire ! " she would never let him, and though she explained the meaning of the drill to them, it is to be doubted if they attached much importance to the explanation, as she herself did not care to talk about it long.

One fine, windy Thursday—it was the second Thursday in March, and the last Thursday the Imp would be able to spend with his new friends, for he was going back to the country—they start-

The Imp and the Drum

ed out a little depressed in spirits : the Imp because it was his last visit, Miss Eleanor because she was afraid her children were in danger of a hard week. The hands of three of the largest factories were "on strike," and though they were quite in the wrong, and were demanding more than any but the ring-leaders themselves felt to be just, they were excited to the pitch of rage that no reasoning can calm, and as the superintendents had absolutely refused to yield any further, affairs were at a dead-lock. One or two of Miss Eleanor's friends had grown alarmed, and urged her not to go there till the matter was settled, but she would not hear of this.

"Why, this is the very time I want to keep the children out of the streets!" she said. "They all know me—nobody would hurt me. They know I love the children, and I have nothing to do with their quarrel. I should be willing to trust myself to any of them. They have always been very polite and respectful to me, and they've been getting ready for this for two weeks, for that matter."

Her father agreed to this, and assured the Imp's mother that any demonstration that might

The Imp and the Drum

take place would be at the other end of the town, near the mills, and that it was very unlikely that anything further than a shut-down for a few days would result, at most.

"They 're in the wrong, and most of them know it, I hear," he said. "They can't hold out long: nobody else will hire them."

This may have been true, but it did not add to their good-humor. As the Imp and Miss Eleanor walked up through the village, the streets were filling rapidly with surly, idle men. Dark-eyed Italians, yellow-haired Swedes, shambling, gesticulating Irish, and dogged, angry English jostled each other on the narrow walks, and talked loudly. Miss Eleanor hurried the Imp along, picking up a child here and there on the way, and sighing with relief as she neared the old hall.

Some of the excitement had reached the children, and though they had come in large numbers, for they knew it was the Imp's last visit for some time, and there had been hints of a delightful surprise for them on this occasion, they were restless and looked out of the windows often. There was a shout of applause when, the Imp suddenly becoming overwhelmed with

The Imp and the Drum

shyness, Miss Eleanor invited them all out to his home for one day in the summer ; but the excitement died down, and more than one of the older children glanced slyly at the door. The men from that end of the town were filing by, and most of the women were following after.

Miss Eleanor racked her brains for some amusement. It was cold in the room, for the boy who had charge of the clumsy, old-fashioned stove was sick that day, and there was no fire. So partly to keep them contented, and partly to get them warm, she proposed a game of blind-man's-buff. There was a shout of assent, and presently they were in the midst of a tremendous game. The stamping feet of the boys and the shrill cries of the girls made a deafening noise ; the dust rose in clouds ; the empty old building echoed confusingly. The fun grew fast and furious ; the rules were forgotten ; the boys began to scuffle and fight, and the little girls danced about excitedly.

Miss Eleanor called once or twice to quiet them, but they were beyond control ; they paid no attention to her. With a little grimace she

The Imp and the Drum

stepped out of the crowd to breathe, and took out her watch.

“Twenty minutes!” she said to little Olga, who followed her about like a puppy. “I’ll give them ten more, and then they *must* stop!”

Little Olga began to cough, and looked doubtfully at the old stove, which was given to smoking.

“It smells bad just the same, don’t it?” she called. They had to raise their voices to be heard above the noise.

“No, child, it’s the dust. Isn’t it dreadful?” Miss Eleanor called back, coughing herself. “But it smells just like smoke. How horrid it is! And how hot!” she added after a moment. “With the windows open, too! We’ll all take cold when we go out. They *must* stop! Boys, boys! Hans, come here to me!”

She rang a little bell that was the signal for quiet, and raised her hand.

“Now I’m going to open the door, to get a thorough draft, and then we’ll quiet down,” she said, and pushed through the crowd to the door.

As she opened it wide, a great cloud of brown, hot smoke poured into the room, a loud roar-

The Imp and the Drum

ing, with little snapping crackles behind it, came from below, and Miss Eleanor suddenly put her hand to her heart, turned perfectly white, and half fell, half leaned against the door.

For a moment the children were quite still, so still that through the open door they could hear the roar and the crackle. Then suddenly, before she could prevent him, little Pierre slipped through and started down the hall. With a cry she went after him, half the children following her, but in a moment they crowded back, screaming and choking. The stairs at the end of the long hall were half on fire !

Miss Eleanor tried to call out, but though her lips moved, she could not speak above a whisper. She shut the door and leaned against it, and the look in her eyes frightened the children out of what little control they had.

"Call," she said hoarsely, "call 'Fire!' out of the window. Quick! Call, all of you!"

But they stumbled about, crying and gasping, some of them struggling to get by her out of the door. She was trembling violently, but she pushed them away and held the door-knob as tightly as she could. Only Olga ran to the open

The Imp and the Drum

window, and sent a piercing little shriek out into the quiet street :

"Fire! Fire! Come along! Fire!"

For a moment there was no answer, and then a frightened woman ran out of her house and waved her hand.

"Come out! Come out, you!" she called.

"Our stairs is burnt all up! We can't!" screamed Olga.

The woman ran quickly down the empty street, calling for help as she ran, and the children surged about the door, a crowd of frightened little animals, trying to drag Miss Eleanor away from it.

"Wait," she begged them, "wait! You can't go that way—they 'll bring ladders! Oh, *please* wait!"

Her knees shook beneath her, the room swam before her eyes. The smell of the smoke, stronger and stronger, sickened her. With a thrill of terror, she saw big Hans drag a child away from the window, and deliberately pushing her down, prepare to climb out over her, almost stepping on her little body.

Suddenly she caught sight of the Imp. He

The Imp and the Drum

was pushing his way through the crowd valiantly, but not toward her.

"Come here, Perry!" she said weakly. But he paid no attention. He had been dazed for a moment, and like all the other children, her terror had terrified him quite as much as the fire. Now as he caught her eye, and saw the helpless fear in her face as she watched Hans, something sent him away from her to a farther corner, and as the smoke began to come up between the boards of the floor, and the same deadly stillness reigned outside, while the confusion grew greater in the hot, crowded room, a new sound cut through the roar and the crackle.

Brrrm !

Brrrm !

Brrrm, brrrm, brrrm !

The children turned. Big Hans, with one leg out of the window, looked back. There was a little rush, half checked, for the sides of the room, and Olga instinctively looked about for her small charges.

But they wavered undecidedly, and as the sound of steps outside and the clattering of horses' feet reached them, a new rush for the

The Imp and the Drum

door began, and Miss Eleanor's hand slipped from the knob, and she half fell beside it.

Brrrm !

Brrrm !

Brrrrr—*um* dum !

That familiar long roll had never been disobeyed ; the habit of sudden, delighted response was strong ; and with a quick recollection that he was to be head boy, big Hans slipped from the window-sill and jumped to the head of a straggling line. Olga was behind him in a moment, and Pierre, proud of his position as rear-guard and time-keeper for the little boys, pushed them, crying and coughing, into place.

Miss Eleanor must have been half unconscious for a moment. When she struggled to her feet, no scrambling crowd, but an orderly, tramping line pushed by her, and above the growing tumult outside, above the sickening roar of the fire below, came the quick, regular beat of the faithful drum

Brrrm !

Brrrm !

Brrrm ! brrrm ! brrrm !

The children marched as if hypnotized. The

The Imp and the Drum

long line just filled the sides of the room, and they were squeezed in so tightly that they forced each other on unconsciously. The Imp in his excitement beat faster than usual, and his bright red cheeks, his straight little figure, as he walked his inside square, his quick, nervous strokes, were an inspiration to the most scared laggard. Big Hans, elated at his position—his for the first time—never took his eyes off the black sticks, and worked his mouth excitedly, keeping time to the beats, the Imp frowning at his slightest misstep.

Miss Eleanor, the door hot against her back, forced her trembling lips into a smile, and cheered them on as they tramped round and round. Was nothing being done? Would no one come?

Suddenly there was a thundering, a clanging, and a quick, sharp ringing gong came closer with every stroke; the sound of many running feet, too, and loud, hoarse orders. The line wavered, seemed to stop. She summoned all her strength, and called out aloud for the first time:

“Don’t stop, children! Keep right on! Stand straight, Hans, and show them how well you can lead!”

The Imp and the Drum

Hans tossed his head, glared at a boy across the room who had broken through, and forged ahead. There was a succession of quick blows on the sides of the room, a rush, and in another moment three helmeted heads looked through three windows. At the same moment a sharp hissing sound interrupted the roaring below, and though the door was brown behind her now, and a tiny red point was glowing brighter in the wall near by, Miss Eleanor's strength returned at the sight of the firemen, and she stood by the side of the Imp and encouraged the children.

"Don't stop, Hans! Remember, little ones first! Olga's children first!"

And with a grunt of assent Hans marched on, the line following, closing up mechanically over the gaps the men made, who snatched out the children as they passed by the windows, and handed them rapidly down the long ladders. In vain the firemen tried to get the boys. They wriggled obstinately out of their grasp, as they went round, till every girl was lifted out, Olga standing by the window till the last of her charges was safe.

The door fell in with a bang, and in spite of

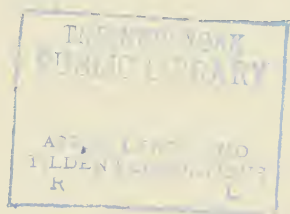
The Imp and the Drum

the hose below, the smoke rolled up from between the cracks in the floor, thicker and thicker. As the plaster dropped from the walls in great blocks, Miss Eleanor dragged the line into the centre of the room, and motioned one of the men to take the Imp as he passed by. For so perfect was the order that the men never once needed to step into the room, only leaning over the sills to lift out the children. The Imp felt a strong grasp on his arm, and jerked off; the man insisted.

“Hurry now, hurry, let go!” he commanded gruffly. The despair in the Imp’s eyes as he drummed hard with his other hand grew to rage, and he brought down his free stick with a whack on the man’s knuckles. With a sharp exclamation the man let go, and the Imp pressed on, his cheeks flaming, his eyes glowing. His head was high in the air, he was panting with excitement. The line was small now; another round and there would be but a handful. The floor near the door began to sag, and the men took two at a time of the bigger boys, and left them to scramble down by themselves. With every new child a shout went up from below. As Hans slipped out by



“As they went round, till every girl was lifted out.”



The Imp and the Drum

himself, and two men lifted Miss Eleanor out of one window, a third meanwhile carrying the Imp, kicking in his excitement, and actually beating the drum as it dangled before him, while a fourth man took a last look, and crying "O. K. ! All out !" ran down his ladder alone, the big crowd literally shouted with thankfulness and excitement.

As for the Imp, he felt tired and shaky, now that somebody had taken away his drum, and all the women were trying to kiss him ; and he watched the blackened walls crash in without a word. His knees felt hollow and queer, and there was nobody to take him in her lap like the other children, for Miss Eleanor had quietly fainted in the firemen's arms, and they were sprinkling her with water from the little pools where the big hose had leaked.

They took them to the station in a carriage, and the Imp sat in Miss Eleanor's lap in a drawing-room car, and she cuddled him silently all the way home. Her father, dreading lest she should be hurt somehow after all in the crowded streets, passed them in an express going in the other direction, to find out that they were safe, and

The Imp and the Drum

that the strike was off. The recent danger had sobered the men, and their thankfulness at their children's safety had softened them, so that their ringleaders' taunts had no effect on their determination to go back to work quietly the next day.

It was at her father's request that they refrained from any more costly gift to Miss Eleanor than a big photographic group of the children, framed in plush, "as an expression of their deep gratitude for her presence of mind in keeping the children in the room away from the deadly flames beneath." But to the Imp the Mill Town drum corps and military band formally presented "to Master Perry S. Stafford the drum and sticks that he used on the occasion when his bravery and coolness made them proud to subscribe themselves his true friends and hearty well-wishers."

THE IMP AND THE AUTHOR

THE IMP AND THE AUTHOR

THE Imp retired, like Achilles, to his tent—it was striped red and blue—and sulked. He dug his heels viciously into the sand, and rattled his iron shovel hideously against his pail ; he had no direct intention of driving the young lady on the red afghan into nervous prostration, or making a headache for the gentleman in the blue glasses, but a vague realization that he was incidentally accomplishing both these results soothed him not a little.

When the gentleman pushed aside the tent flap and irritably inquired if that infernal noise was necessary to his happiness, the Imp pounded harder and answered grumpily that it was. He was only seven.

The sun beat hotter and hotter against his tent, the sand burned under him, the tide was still coming in, and the long tumbling waves were creeping farther and farther up the great beach,

The Imp and the Author

but still the Imp sat drumming on the pail and communing bitterly with his thoughts.

Let them go in to lunch ! Let them sit and chatter meaninglessly around the snowy tables ! Let them plan their moonlight sails with refreshments in baskets and Miss Eleanor's guitar ! At least there would be one person whose ear would not be pinched that day ; one suffering soul that none should find opportunity to call a ridiculous baby and a funny little Imp ; one determined recluse whose opinion of some others would, were it known, blight with its withering scorn all their self-satisfied conceit !

When every sound, including the futile shouting of his own name, at which he grimly smiled, had ceased, and the last lingering child had been haled in from its blissful paddling to lunch, the last lounge summoned from his umbrella, he arose and walked gloomily by the much-sounding sea. Had one thing in all this weary morning gone right ? Had there been one cheerful happening, one single ray of pleasure ? Not one. From the idiot who had derided his precious bicycle trousers, calling that fascinating triangular seat a patch, refusing to be convinced of its style

The Imp and the Author

and suitability, to the mocking crew who vied with each other in describing his probable sleepiness, seasickness, homesickness, in case he went on that moonlight sail, humanity had conspired against him.

From a ledge of rock he pulled out a tiny boat with a draggled dirty sail, and crowded the bowsprit into his hip pocket. It interfered with his gait and prevented walking with ease, but he pushed on : there are mental conditions, it is well known, when physical discomfort is rather a relief than otherwise.

Far away before him the long white beach rolled out ; a half-mile away a great rock jutted up, and under its ledges there spread a cunning little pool that just suited his tiny boat. He had gone there once in happier times with those who, far from scorning his company, had themselves suggested it. They had taken a glorious lunch in a big basket, and the day stood out in his memory white and shining. He would go there now and summon up remembrance of things past.

The Imp's blue denim legs were short, and the obstruction in his hip pocket made his walk

The Imp and the Author

slower than usual. It was farther to the pool than he had thought, moreover, and the slab of hard ginger cake that had stood him for his morning lunch had not been large. But he kept doggedly on his way, and came at last to the welcome shadow of the big rock.

A heavy frown drew his brows together. There, right in the coolest part of the shadow, lay a large middle-aged man, fast asleep. O Solitude ! thou art like thy sister Sleep, elusive, and not to be had for the mere asking ! Right near his pool the man lay, and as the Imp cautiously stole up to him and examined him, he remembered having seen him before—he ate at the hotel, in fact. This was the man the ladies talked about so much and were so polite to. They brought him books and asked him to write his name in them, and they took snap-shots of him in his bathing-suit, which was said to have deeply displeased him. They strolled frequently about his little cottage, and one tall thin lady with glasses used to put heliotrope at his place at breakfast till he complained to the manager.

The Imp had heard him complain ; he said, “ Hang it all, Simmons, it gives me hay-fever,

The Imp and the Author

you know. I can't bear the damned stuff! Can't you choke it off?"

The Imp had repeated this speech to his father and his Uncle Stanley, who came down for Sunday, and they had roared with laughter. The Imp had never heard of hay-fever, and he was impressed with the idea that the heliotrope possessed the man with a mad longing for hay—to eat, presumably. A few cautious and vague inquiries along this line had elicited the statement that the only person who was known to have thus regaled himself was Nebuchadnezzar, the King of the Jews. The Imp's one idea of this historical personage was derived from a friend in the city, who sang a song about him to the effect that he jumped out of his stockings and into his shoes. This seemed an odd and on the whole meaningless feat, and the Imp unconsciously transferred a justly merited contempt for the frivolous monarch to his representative at the cottage.

Though a prominent man he was far from popular at the shore, for he spoke seldom and gruffly, and was held to be haughty and reserved. Once he had been asked to give a reading for the benefit of the hotel servants, but he had un-

The Imp and the Author

conditionally refused—he said he would rather tip them when he left.

These things the Imp recalled as he watched him. A strange man, doubtless, but Uncle Stanley said that great authors felt obliged to be strange: the public expected it.

The Imp sat down across the pool from the Author and rested from his walk. A pleasant melancholy stole over him as he fancied their search for him—lunch must be well over by now. After a little he quietly launched the boat, for the Author was so still that he made no difference to speak of, and played peacefully. From an inner pocket he produced a little box with an elastic band about it. Having dug a pit in the sand, he reversed the open box, and a hot, tangled mass of hard-shelled, middle-sized insects tumbled out into the hole. They were on the order of potato-bugs, but larger, and the Imp, selecting with great discrimination the biggest, proceeded to place them on the deck and in the rigging of the ship. They did not like the water, so they stayed there, climbing slowly up and down the masts and scuttling busily about the deck in a most lifelike and pleasing manner.

The Imp and the Author

For a long time the Imp conducted this craft about the pool, fanning up a gale with his cap, and occasionally blowing a sailor off for the thrill of rescuing him. Immersed in the game, he was violently startled by a sudden exclamation.

“Good Lord!”

The Author was sitting up and staring at him. “When did *you* come here?” he demanded.

“I’ve been here quite a while,” the Imp responded with dignity.

“The deuce you have!” said the Author. “And I was asleep all the time!”

“Yes,” returned the Imp, “you were. But I didn’t mind.”

“Oh!” said the Author, adding, “Well, that’s good!”

Here he caught sight of the ship, and grinned widely.

“Well, if that isn’t clever!” said he warmly. “I say, that’s awfully clever!” At this appreciation the Imp unbent.

“I’m going to have a rescue now,” he remarked genially, and with a mighty puff he sent fully half the crew into the waves. This was more than he had intended, and while he laboriously scooped

The Imp and the Author

up the captain and laid him dripping and exhausted on the bow, he saw to his horror that two of the deck-hands were unmistakably sinking.

"Oh, get 'em! get 'em!" he cried, hopping madly about the pool in his effort to capture the first mate, the biggest of all, while the poor deck-hands curled in their legs and eddied feebly about.

The Author leaped to his feet. "Where? where?" he cried nervously.

The Imp made an ineffectual dive for the mate, and waved a grimy hand toward the middle.

"Over there! Oh, hurry! hurry!" he panted.

The Author grabbed viciously at the deck-hands, lost his balance, and plunged to his armpits in the pool, while the gallant ship rocked wildly in the great waves, and the Imp, yelling with excitement, swept the nearly drowned sailors into his cap, and hurried with them to the little pit.

"Look out!" he called in exasperation, as the Author in an effort to tow the boat in to shore nearly tipped the captain off again. "Let it alone, can't you?"

The Imp and the Author

The Author obeyed, and as the Imp skilfully fanned the ship to port, he smiled contritely.

"I'm terribly clumsy," he admitted, "but you see I'm not used to it. I'm not much of a sailor, anyway."

The Imp had a cheerful disposition, but his temper had been greatly tried to-day, and he had had no luncheon. So he was only partly mollified.

"You're dreadful slow, seems to me," he said, crossly.

"I know it," the Author returned meekly. "I know I was, but you see, I really wasn't awake."

"Humph!" sniffed the Imp. "You must 'a' been pretty sleepy, I guess."

"I was," said the Author. "I didn't sleep much last night."

"Nightmare?" suggested the Imp, more sympathetically. He had had a little experience in that line.

"No," the Author replied briefly, adding with a queer, disagreeable smile, "Oh, well, it was a kind of nightmare, I suppose."

The Imp did not even pretend much interest.

The Imp and the Author

He was very hungry indeed, and his wrongs returned to him suddenly, as the excitement of the rescue died away, and his legs began to feel as if they had gone a long distance—which, indeed, they had. So he replied very briefly to the Author's remarks, and finally took no notice at all, but sat looking gloomily out to sea. The Author regarded him seriously.

"You don't seem very sociable," he said at length.

The Imp made no reply.

"Perhaps you came out here to be alone," the Author hazarded.

The Imp stuck his lip out and dug his heel into the sand.

"I believe you did," the Author continued, "well, so did I. Queer we should have struck this place together, wasn't it?"

There was no answer, and he went on looking with interest at the little scowling Imp beside him.

"You must have felt pretty bad to come 'way out here," he said, "what's the matter?"

The Imp looked at him suspiciously, but he perceived that this man was no meddling busy-

The Imp and the Author

body, nor, for that matter, a sentimental baby-tender. No, he was serious and sincere. So the Imp turned about and recited his wrongs systematically and in detail, ending with a bitter emphasis :

“And I don’t believe I’ll *ever* go back, ever at all! *They’ll* be sorry then, I’ll bet!”

“Oh, yes, you will,” said the Author quietly ; “where’ll you get your meals?”

The Imp’s expression changed. A worried look crept into his round brown eyes. He scowled, and considered how long ago he had had that ginger-bread.

“Oh, my! Oh, dear me!” he wailed, “I *am* so hungry!”

The Author jumped up. “Why, haven’t you had your lunch?” he cried. “Here, wait a minute! I forgot all about it!”

He ran around the rock, and presently returned with a big white beach-umbrella rolled up. Strapped to it was a fair-sized box and a bottle, leather-covered. From out of the box he lifted a little napkin, and then—oh joy!—some fat white sandwiches appeared. Deviled eggs nestled in the corners, and three little soft round sponge-

The Imp and the Author

cakes paved the bottom. The Imp's eyes glistened ; he sucked in his lips. The Author unscrewed the bottle, and the bottom of it appeared to fall off and turned miraculously into a silver cup.

"Do you like cold coffee?" he inquired, and as the Imp nodded voraciously he gravely poured him out a cup.

"Now fall to !" he said, and the Imp clutched a sandwich and lifted the cup to his eager lips. His round eyes beamed at the Author over the rim as he tilted back his head. A drop splashed on his blouse, and the Author started up again. "Here, wait a bit !" he said kindly, and with a practised gesture he twisted the napkin around the Imp's impatient little neck.

There was a silence while the Imp ate and drank, rapidly and to good purpose, and the Author watched him. At his third sandwich the Imp paused a moment.

"Don't you want some?" he inquired thickly, with a hospitable wave of the cup. The Author shook his head.

"No, thanks ; I don't feel hungry—I had my breakfast late," he said. "They insisted on putting this up ; I'm glad they did, now."

The Imp and the Author

There was another silence, and the Imp began on the eggs. Later he fell upon the little cakes ; and at last, with one long luxurious drink, he wiped his mouth on the napkin and sighed thankfully.

New strength entered into him, and his drooping resolution revived.

“ I’ll stay here till after dinner ! ” he announced.

“ I sha’n’t be hungry—I’ll make ’em mad ! ”

The Author looked strangely at him.

“ Do you know, I wouldn’t, if I were you,” he said gently. “ You—you don’t want to frighten them.”

“ Ho! you wait till I go off and stay all night ! ” the Imp boasted ; “ they’ll wonder where I am, then, I guess ! ”

The Author stared ahead of him. “ Yes, you’re right,” he said bitterly, “ they’ll wonder where you are ! They’ll lie awake to wonder ! That’s what parents are for, it seems ! ”

The Imp looked curiously at him. This man who gave good lunches so royally and owned a sail-boat was troubled, apparently.

“ I lay awake and wondered myself, last night,” said the Author, still looking ahead of him.

The Imp and the Author

The Imp looked puzzled.

"Have *you* got a little boy," he inquired doubtfully, "that stayed away all night?"

The Author laughed, but not happily.

"Yes," he said, "just so. I've got a little boy that stays away all night. So you see I know how they'll feel, when you do."

The Imp pondered.

"Does it make you feel bad? Do you feel real scared about him?" he asked in an awed tone.

For the Author's face was unspeakably sad, his mouth was bent sternly.

"He is breaking my heart," he said.

The Imp pulled himself across the sand and laid his hand on his friend's knee. He would have been glad to say something, but he was only seven, so he knew enough to keep still.

After a long pause an idea suddenly occurred to him, and with a startling imitation of one of his mother's friends, he asked earnestly, "Have you tried keeping him in afternoons?"

The Author jumped, stared at him, and laughed again.

"Bless your heart!" he said softly, "I'm afraid that wouldn't do."

The Imp and the Author

The Imp blushed and bit his lip. What he was about to say was not pleasant, but he felt that he owed it to his friend—confidence for confidence.

“When I’ve been—been real bad,” he said, “and then ask to go and play with—with anybody, they’ll say I can’t. For—for a punishment, you know.”

“I couldn’t do that,” said the Author, “because he doesn’t ask. He goes and plays with them without asking!”

“Oh!” murmured the Imp. Then, respectfully, “He’s pretty bad, isn’t he?”

The Author nodded. “Yes, he’s pretty bad,” he said, almost in a whisper.

The Imp leaned his head against the Author’s arm. He was getting very drowsy. The walk and the sun and the luncheon were telling on him. He felt very comfortable and perfectly safe with this big, troubled man. The Author put one arm around him and half lifted him on his lap. The Imp was nearly asleep, but he held himself awake long enough to offer his last suggestion.

“When I said I’d smash the glass that time,

The Imp and the Author

an' I said I would—an'—an' I did, an' they didn't know what to do, an' m' faver said, 'I'll make him say he's sorry,' an' I wouldn't, an' I wouldn't, an' I didn't. . . ."

He was drifting off fast. The Author drew a long breath.

"Oh, yes," he said, so low that the Imp hardly heard his voice, "but there's nothing I haven't tried—short of killing him! Nothing shames him—nothing!"

He squeezed the Imp so hard that he started in confusion, and vaguely took up his tale :

"So he came. An' he said, 'I didn't think—think you'd do it, Boy!' an'—an'. . . .I said. . . .sorry. . . .bad. . . .any more. . . ."

The Imp was fast asleep.

The Author sat motionless and held him fast. The warm little body relaxed against his arm; the heavy head, brown, cropped, and sunburnt, fell on his shoulder. The Author looked at him as if he saw something else.

"My God!" he whispered, "to think what he is now!"

The sun was turning slowly to the west. The shadow of the rock crept farther along. An

The Imp and the Author

hour slipped by, and still the Author held the Imp, and still the Imp slept. The Author looked far out to sea ; he seemed not to know what was about him ; sometimes his lips moved.

Suddenly a quick crunching step sounded behind them. A tall young man came up the beach and stood between them and the water. He caught the Author's eye.

"Well?" he said defiantly.

The Author pointed to the Imp. "'Sh!" he motioned with his lips, and looked silently at the young man. The young man shifted his eyes, and a flush crept over his handsome haggard face.

"Well?" he said again uneasily, adding in a low voice, with a questioning look at the Imp, "They said you went off this way, so I came along. What is it? Same old story, I suppose?"

Still the Author did not speak. He looked steadily at the young man, and the strange depth of his look drew into it irresistibly the hard tired eyes opposite, while the lad shuffled his feet in the sand and tried to speak.

The Author's lips quivered, he fed his eyes on



The Imp and the Author

the boy as if he were looking at what he should never see again, and then his voice, hushed for the Imp's sake, broke the stillness.

"I—I didn't think you'd do it, Boy—I didn't think you would!" he said, and that was all.

The young man started, his eyes widened almost in terror, he caught his breath, and put out his hands as if to ward off some dreaded thing; and then suddenly his muscles gave way, his mouth twisted, and with a little hoarse exclamation he threw himself down on the sand and burst into great racking sobs.

After a while the Author looked toward him and held out his right arm—the Imp was in his left.

"Here, Boy," he said gently, "come here!"

The young man crept up like a little boy and laid his head against the Author's shoulder.

They sat in silence. In front the water rose and fell quietly. The tide was slipping out, and the long creamy breakers pounded softly in the distance, leaving a dark polished rim behind them. A flock of gulls flapped slowly by, black against the reddening clouds. In the silence one could almost hear the sun sink down.

The Imp and the Author

Later, sounds mingled with the Imp's dreams: a long, low murmur, often interrupted. Someone, far off, seemed talking, talking softly to someone else.

And still later he seemed to be on his boat—he was, indeed, first mate—and there was a high sea. He pitched and tossed, and woke with a start to find himself journeying homeward high up in the Author's arms. But they were not alone. A tall young man was walking close behind, carrying the beach-umbrella, his hand on the shoulder where the Imp's head lay, his eyes fixed wonderingly on his father's face.

THE IMP'S MATINÉE

THE IMP'S MATINÉE

THE Imp strolled out of the big summer hotel with that careless and disengaged air that meant particular and pressing business. It was very early—lunch was barely over—and he was the only person on the broad piazza. As he rounded the corner he ran against Bell-boy No. 5, a great friend of his.

“Hello, Imp!” shouted No. 5, “where you goin’?”

“To the theatre to buy my ticket for the play!” announced the Imp proudly.

“Oh!” said No. 5, “guess I’d rather go to the circus over at Milltown. That’s to-day, too. Why don’t you go there? Ev’rybody in town’s goin’, except these hotel folks. Why don’t you go?”

The Imp frowned. This was a tender point. “I said that I would just as soon *not* go to the circus, Jim,” said he. “I *could* have went if I had liked—that is, I very nearly could. And I

The Imp's Matinée

said that if they would *very* much rather I went to the theatre instead, and if—" here the Imp forgot his elaborate courtesy and spluttered, "if they'd stop making such a time over me because I am only seven and a quarter, and Milltown is four miles off, and Uncle Stanley isn't here, and Mr. Jarvis says the elephant hates polo-caps, and I had a little tiny headache last week and I'm all right now——"

"Oh, well," said No. 5 soothingly, "I guess it's no great shakes of a circus. I guess the play'll be a lot better. I——"

"Third floor, here at once!" somebody called. "Five! I say, Five!"

"That's me," said No. 5, in a surprised tone. "I guess I'd better toddle off sometime to-day. So long, Imp!"

A drop of bitterness had fallen into the Imp's cup of pleasure. He had almost begun to believe he preferred the theatre to the circus, and now—whatever Jim might say, *he* was going to Milltown! He tramped through the little dusty town, looking at its one street of shops with undisguised contempt. This town was really very small. He extracted a quarter from his dirty little

The Imp's Matinée

pocket-book, treasured because the parting gift of James O'Connor, and walked lightly into the small, dingy theatre. In the ticket-office stood a tall, white-faced man, very shabbily dressed, with dark, glowing eyes that stared at the Imp uncomfortably; he felt like an intruder. But secure in the consciousness of virtue, he laid down the quarter with a slap on the little counter.

"I would like a ticket to this theatre this afternoon," he said, politely but firmly.

"Oh!" said the man, "that's more than many would!" and he laughed unpleasantly. "You aren't patronizing the circus to-day, then?" The Imp blushed.

"No, I'm not," he said faintly, "I'm patterizing this theatre instead. I—I thought I'd better." The man turned away rather crossly and lit a cigar.

"Go on in, then," he said, "and take your pick of seats. The crowd's not so big but that you'll get a good one."

The Imp walked through a dirty green baize door into a small theatre, quite empty. Across the stage scuttled a man with a dustpan in one hand and a wig in the other. From behind the curtain came voices pitched high, as of people

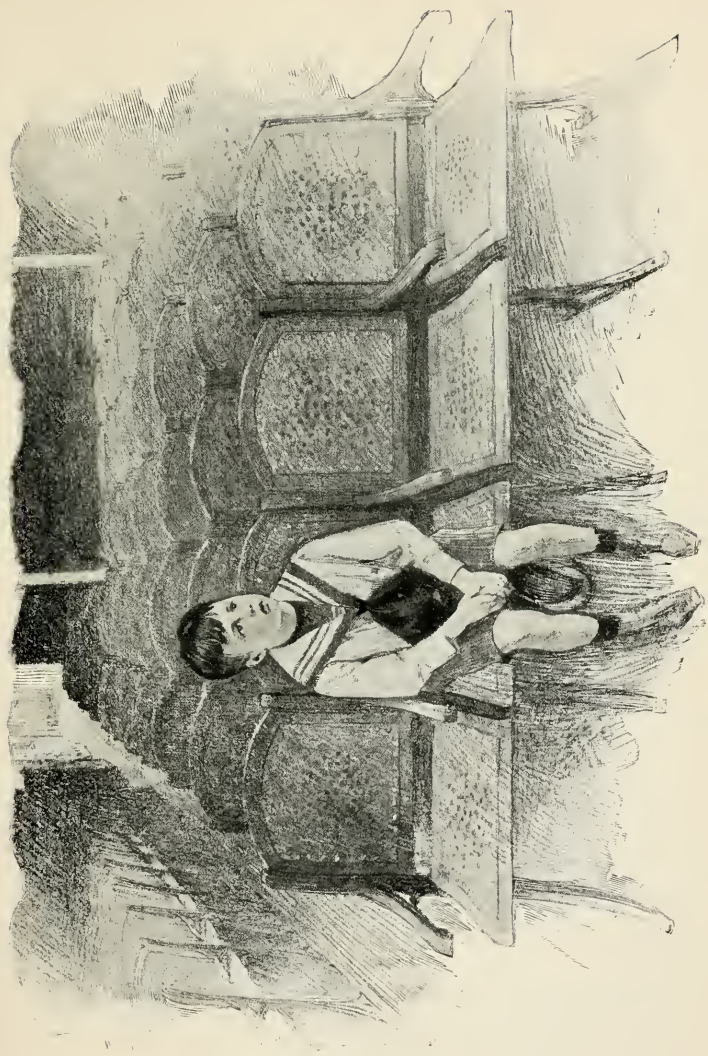
The Imp's Matinée

quarrelling. The hot sun streamed through the holes in the window shades and showed the dust and dirt and stains that covered everything. It was a distinctly dreary scene, and the Imp felt very lonely and mournful. Nevertheless he was on pleasure bent, and so he walked up to the front seat on the aisle and settled himself expectantly.

For some time nothing occurred. Then the curtain was pushed aside and a woman peeped out. As she saw the Imp's interested face beaming from the front seat in the aisle her mouth slowly opened. "Lord!" she said, and disappeared.

The Imp had never been to the theatre in his life, but he had heard it discussed. Doubtless this was the first act. He had never heard of any act that came after the fourth—Uncle Stanley said he always skipped the fourth act—so there would be but three more, in all probability. Three more heads—interesting, but brief in their stay—and then it would be over? Impossible! Twenty-five cents for that? He grew red with indignation.

A long wait, at least ten minutes, then the curtain was pulled from the other side and a man's head peered cautiously out. The Imp caught his



The audience waited with dogged patience for twenty minutes.

THE NEW YORK
PUBLIC LIBRARY

ASTOR LENOX AND
TILDEN FOUNDATIONS
L

The Imp's Matinée

eye and glared stonily at him. The man's mouth opened and he said with some temper, "Oh, *darn* that circus, anyhow!" Then he disappeared. Act two. The theatre certainly left a great deal to be desired. And *darn* was a very bad word.

Then absolutely nothing happened, though the audience waited with dogged patience for twenty minutes. Finally he got up and strolled down to the office. The man with the dark eyes that looked somehow very unhappy for all he scowled so fiercely, was blowing rings of smoke through the little opening where you bought the tickets. The Imp confronted him in injured innocence, and sniffed, after the fashion of people who are too old to cry, but who will give way to tears if they are in the privacy of their mother's bedroom. "Is the theatre over?" he asked.

The man stared. "Have you been in there all this time?" he said. "Why, there isn't going to be any play, sonny. There's nobody to play to, you see."

"There's me," said the Imp.

The man coughed. "Yes, there's you," he agreed, "but I'm afraid you won't quite do. The company couldn't be expected to perform, you see,

The Imp's Matinée

for just one k—one person. I'll give you your money back and you can go—Oh, go to the circus!”

This was the last straw. The Imp cast himself on the dirty floor, to the great detriment of his blouse, and wept openly.

“But I *can't!*” he wailed. “I *can't* go to the circus! I promised I'd be sat-satisfied to c-come here to the th-theatre! And now there isn't any theatre! And I can't break my p-p-promise! Oh, dear! Oh, dear!”

The man came out of the office and patted the Imp kindly on the shoulder.

“Come, take a brace now!” he said. “Get up and never mind. It's hard luck, I know, but you see they can't play for one boy—they simply can't. They'd like to play well enough—that's what they're here for, you see, but it wouldn't be worth while to go to all that fuss for one seat. I—I'm sorry for you, by Jove I am! The only man who sticks by the legitimate!” And he laughed. The Imp didn't understand, but he knew the man meant well, and he didn't mind being laughed at in that spirit. He sat up and brushed his polo-cap. “I wish I was twins,” he said thoughtfully,

The Imp's Matinée

“and then I'd count for more ! I wish I was a whole family !”

The man laughed again. “I wish you were,” he said. The Imp turned the polo-cap around in his hands.

“Would you act the theatre for ten people ?” he said. The man shook his head.

“I'm afraid not : it wouldn't pay.”

“Would you act it for twenty people ?”

The man hesitated. “That's pretty small,” he said, “I don't know.” The Imp gasped at his own daring, but persisted.

“Would you do it for thirty ?” The man looked at the determined little figure in a blouse and corduroy knee-breeches.

“Why, ye-es, I guess they would,” he said slowly, “that would pay the fares : I guess they would. Why ?”

“Then you wait ! you just wait !” begged the Imp, with the fire of resolution in his eye. “You just make 'em wait a minute. I'll be back—you just wait !” He nodded encouragingly to the astonished man and fled up the narrow, deserted street. His heart was beating high : his tears were forgotten. He should see the theatre. Now

The Imp's Matinée

that he knew that the two heads were not all that he had paid twenty-five cents to behold, his hopes rose again.

He panted through the drive-way and stopped to get his breath at the hotel steps. The Hungarian Gypsy band was playing on the broad piazza, and everybody was sitting there, laughing and chatting. There were at least a hundred people, and they all sat perfectly still and stared, when a dirty little boy dashed up the steps and cried wildly at them,

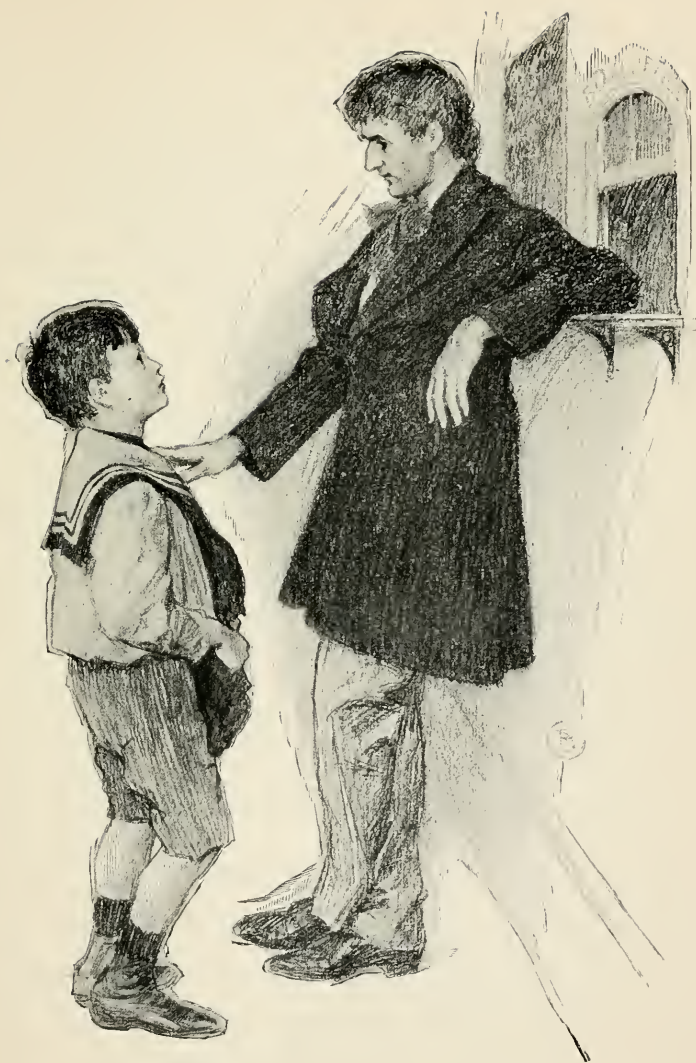
"Will you please to come to the theatre? Oh, *won't* you come to the theatre? Won't thirty of you come to the theatre with me?"

The Tall Young Man in white tennis flannels advanced and grinned in his kindly way at the Imp.

"What's all this? What's up?" he inquired. The Imp remembered his manners and took off his red polo-cap.

"How do you do?" he asked politely. The tall young man replied that he was quite well, rather better than usual in fact.

"Did I understand you to invite me to the theatre?" he added. Oh, ceremony takes up so



"They can't play for one boy—they simply can't," said the man.



The Imp's Matinée

much valuable time ! The Imp glanced behind him — had the theatre people gone ? Were they tired of waiting ? Then he burst into his tale.

“ I paid twenty-five cents to go to the theatre, and everybody's gone to the circus, and they won't act the theatre for just me, and I paid for my ticket ! ”

He stopped for breath and the Hungarian band, at a nod from the leader, stopped playing at the same moment. The Imp's face was tragic : one would have thought he was describing a scene of anguish.

“ So I asked the man would he act the theatre for ten people, and he wouldn't. And I asked him would he for twenty people, and he wouldn't. And I asked him would he for thirty people, and he would. And I hurried up *so* much, and I hope they haven't gone, and *won't* you come ? It's only twenty-five cents ! ”

Here the Imp sat down and fanned himself with his cap and sobbed for pure excitement. Everybody looked exceedingly interested, and Miss Eleanor, in the beautiful bright red dress, was distinctly sympathetic.

The Imp's Matinée

"Poor little fellow!" she said softly. "Poor, tired little Imp!"

The Tall Young Man in tennis flannels faced the company. "My friends," he said earnestly, "we cannot neglect this appeal. Come to the theatre!"

And before the Imp could find time to be surprised, the people on the piazza burst into laughter and followed the Tall Young Man down the steps.

"They're all coming! All but old Mrs. Sampson and Mr. Reed! Everyone!" he gasped, as they hurried along.

"Of course they're coming, when *we* invited them," said the Tall Young Man. "Hello! what's this?" Up the road came five, six big carryalls from the hotel across the river, full of summer people. They had horns and whistles and they made a very jolly noise. "Hallo, the Mayflower!" called the Tall Young Man.

"Hallo, the Plymouth!" called back somebody from the wagons. "What's this? Sunday-school picnic?"

"Not much!" said the Tall Young Man. "This is a theatre-party, this is! It's no use going to

The Imp's Matinée

call on the Plymouth—we're not at home ! Come on to the *matinée* !” Then everybody laughed and somebody said, “Oh, come on !” and they scrambled out and joined the procession.

It was very gay and exciting ! the pretty young women with fluffy parasols, the nice young men with flannels and knickerbockers, the fathers that vowed they'd not come a step farther, and the mothers that said, “Oh, yes, to please little Perry Stafford ! He's such a dear !” If the Imp had heard, he would have been greatly surprised. But he was at the head of the procession, striding manfully along, trying to match his short brown corduroy legs to the long white flannel ones. Everything was going beautifully—better than he had dared to hope. He grew very excited, and as they passed the little church and saw a group of people in white dresses eating strawberries on the lawn, he pulled the Tall Young Man's sleeve. “Ask them, too !” he whispered.

“By all means !” agreed the Tall Young Man, and he strode across the lawn and talked vigorously for a moment. There was some objection. The Tall Young Man waved his hand toward the gay, laughing crowd in the rear.

The Imp's Matinée

"Aren't we respectable enough for you?" he demanded. "Good gracious! What do you want? Why, *I'm* going myself! Second-rate show, indeed!"

The Imp dashed up. "It *isn't* second-rate, truly!" he cried eagerly. "It's third-rate! Mr. Lee said so, when I asked to go! So there!"

Then they laughed and said, "Oh, well, if it's *third-rate*—" and lo and behold, they came along!

The Imp conducted them to the door of the theatre and went in ahead with the Tall Young Man. Coming down the aisle were a man and woman, and at sight of the Imp and his escort they stopped and stared. The Imp recognized them as his friends of the first and second acts.

"Oh, go back! go back!" he said eagerly. "There are lots of us at the theatre, now! There's lots more than thirty!" They turned and fled behind the curtain.

After a crowded session at the "box office" as the Tall Young Man called it, the procession poured in, laughing and talking. They filled the wooden settees and the four dingy boxes at the side of the stage, and then, with a burst of applause from the audience, in came the Hun-

The Imp's Matinée

garian band ! They settled themselves below the stage and as the Tall Young Man, who was busily showing people to their seats, called out in a high cracked voice, " Ladies please *remove* their hats *in* the parquet !" they struck up the overture to *William Tell*, and the Imp felt that heaven could be only a little better than the theatre.

The people all seemed so jolly, and everybody laughed so loudly, and the Tall Young Man was so funny, as he fanned the ladies in the boxes with newspapers, and leaned over their chairs, and made opera-glasses of his hands and stared down at the Imp !

" Who is that beautiful child in brown corduroy ? " he asked loudly. " Who *can* that angel be ? He is too valuable to be left alone ! " And they all laughed—but the Imp didn't care. He was too happy. He made glasses of his hands, too, and so did the rest, and stared at the box where the Tall Young Man stood.

And then a bell struck, once, twice, and the music stopped and the curtain rose. The Imp held his breath. A beautiful lady sat all alone on a bench in a garden.

" Alas ! " she said in a loud voice, " what an

The Imp's Matinée

unhappy lot is mine!" The Imp would have liked to hear more, but the people began to clap their hands very hard and the Tall Young Man especially seemed quite beside himself with enthusiasm. The lady appeared somewhat embarrassed, but kept on with her speech, and soon the applause stopped.

Then the play went on. The Imp did not understand the plot at all, he could not make out half they said, but he was deeply interested, nevertheless. He felt that he was in a way the proprietor of the thing, and he only wished his mother and Aunt Gertrude were not away up the river in a row-boat, and could see what he had brought to pass.

At one point in the play he caught his breath, for there stalked on the stage, in a big black hat and top boots, his friend who took the money for the tickets! Everybody laughed and applauded as soon as he came in, and the leader of the Hungarian band laughed, too, and played a queer, sad, jerky music that made the Imp feel half afraid. The band watched his violin and followed whatever he played, laughing all the time.

As soon as the man began to speak, the

The Imp's Matinée

Imp trembled, his voice was so low and menacing.

"That's the Heavy Villain, Imp dear," said Miss Eleanor, who sat by him.

"Heavy?" said the Imp, curiously; "heavy? How much does he weigh? More than my Uncle Stanley?" Miss Eleanor laughed. "Oh, tons more!" she said.

After the man had talked a little, the people sat quite still. His big eyes burned and glowed, his hands trembled, and when he stepped out to the front and made a long, threatening speech and shook his fist and strode away muttering, they burst into applause that seemed even to the little Imp to be very enthusiastic and real. They clapped so long that he came back, and stood very straight, and bowed and smiled, and one of the ladies in the boxes threw on the stage at his feet a bunch of mountain-laurel. He bent and picked it up and walked off very proudly, and after that, whenever he came on they kept very still, and applauded loudly when he went off.

The Imp didn't know that it was a poor play, poorly staged, and except for the Heavy Villain, poorly acted. He didn't know that the city peo-

The Imp's Matinée

ple laughed at the tragic parts and sighed at the comic scenes and enjoyed the joke of being in a little dingy country theatre more than anything on the stage. He thought that people always ate candy and pop-corn balls at theatres, and did not doubt that it was the custom to converse from the floor with the boxes between the acts.

And when it was over, and the wicked Villain had died so naturally that the Imp was terribly frightened and hid his face in Miss Eleanor's red lap, they applauded more than ever, and called the delighted actors before the curtain and threw what flowers and candy they had left at them, and the band "played them out," as the Tall Young Man in flannel said. And a fat, fussy gentleman who had absolutely refused to come to this theatre, and had only allowed himself to be led there by Miss Eleanor, rushed down the aisle and up the side steps behind the curtain. The Imp heard someone say, "He's gone to get that Villain. Big piece of luck for him!"

So he fled rapidly after the fat, fussy gentleman, for the Villain was his friend, and he wished to see him get a big piece of luck.

They pushed through a little crowd of men and

The Imp's Matinée

women, laughing and eating and walking about half-dressed, to a big, bare room where the Heavy Villain sat with his head on his arms, all alone. The fussy gentleman trotted over to him and tapped his shoulder.

"Look here," he said, "isn't this Henry Blair?" The Villain looked up. His eyes were blacker than ever.

"Yes, it is," he said shortly. "Who are you?"

The fussy gentleman smiled. "I'm Sibley, of New York," he said. The Villain started up.

"Sibley?" he stammered, "L. P. Sibley, the manager?"

"The very same," said the fussy gentleman, "and the man who made your father famous. What are you doing here, Blair?" The Villain blushed.

"I was sick," he said, "and I got discouraged, and I got in here and we drifted along——"

"Well, you want to stop drifting and get to work," said the fussy gentleman. "You quit this travelling insane-asylum as soon as you can, and come down to me. You've got your father's talent, young man, and you want to do something with it. D'you see?"

The Imp's Matinée

The Villain seemed very much moved and very grateful. He seized the fussy gentleman's hand and pressed it and said he'd never forget his kindness, and other things the Imp didn't understand at all. Why so grateful at being told to get to work? Still he was glad if the Villain was, for he liked the Villain.

"Oh don't thank me—thank our friend the Imp," said the fussy gentleman quickly. "If it hadn't been for him we'd none of us have come near the place. It's his show." Then the Villain seized the Imp and blessed him, and as the gentleman's back was turned just then, actually kissed him!

"What's the matter?" said the Imp as he wiped his cheek, "do you feel bad?" and remembering the Villain's advice to him when he was grovelling on the floor, he patted his head kindly. "Come, take a brace!" he said in a fatherly way.

So they laughed and went away, the fussy gentleman and the Imp, and Miss Eleanor was waiting for them, and they walked home together, the Imp very tired, but Oh, very, very happy!

The people had told his mother about it and

The Imp's Matinée

she was half reproachful and half amused, as she often was.

"Perry Scott Stafford, how did you ever dare to do it?" she said.

Before he could answer, the Tall Young Man in white flannels spoke for him.

"Why, Mrs. Stafford, he is a public benefactor!" said this jolly young man. "It is entirely owing to the untiring zeal of the Imp, ladies and gentlemen," turning to the people generally, "that we have been enabled to enjoy this finely staged, beautifully interpreted melodrama. He shall have a vote of thanks. Three cheers for the Imp!"

And the Imp, terribly embarrassed at such public mention, endeavored to hide behind his polo-cap, and finally ran up the stairs followed by the cheers and his mother.

On the landing stood Bell-boy No. 5.

"Play good?" he inquired, as they passed. The Imp turned a beaming face to his friend in uniform. "Oh, Jim! he said, "the circus isn't *in* it with the theatre!"

THE IMP'S CHRISTMAS DINNER

THE IMP'S CHRISTMAS DINNER

EVERYONE knows that J. W. Henderson, though he has a large office in his great department store and though his name is on every piece of paper that the clerks wrap about the goods they sell, is not the only manager of the business. He is a great business man and is respected wherever he is known, but the person who really controls the important matters of the great shop, or who can when he will take the trouble, is George Perry Scott, who has a five-eighths interest, and who, when he is not off on his yacht, or shooting in the Adirondacks, or getting up parties of young people to have a jolly time with him, will sometimes turn his attention to his New York business, and then Mr. Henderson has to be very polite and sometimes change his plans a little. For George Perry Scott is a very determined man.

But he is not fond of business, as everybody knows, too, and so he leaves it for the most part

The Imp's Christmas Dinner

to his partner, never enters the store at all, and much prefers to talk about something else when you try to find out if it is twelve or fifteen hundred employees that are registered on the books, and if his wasn't the first place of the kind to provide the sales-girls with seats behind the long counters.

"I shouldn't wonder," he says cheerfully, and asks you if you've seen his new golf-links.

But let anyone intimate that something isn't quite straight with J. W. Henderson's establishment, that it hasn't all the modern appliances, perhaps, or that some little crooked transaction turned out for the benefit of the store and to the disadvantage of the buyer, and George Perry Scott takes a little run to New York and stays at his club there for a while. And during that time Mr. Henderson, who is a good man, if a trifle selfish and very anxious for dollars, is apt to be a little uneven in his temper, and talks to the head book-keeper about the extravagance of society men who get mixed up in business concerns.

But well known as he is in business circles, and valuable as is his knowledge of every branch

The Imp's Christmas Dinner

of his own particular business, it was not Mr. Henderson who saved the establishment from the greatest danger it was ever threatened with, but the "society member" himself. And there are those who say that not even he deserves that reputation, but that the honor is due to a much smaller and less important personage. It happened in this way.

One day late in the fall the Imp happened to be left alone in the house with only the waitress to bear him company. The house was his Aunt Gertrude's—Big Aunty she was called, to distinguish her from little Aunt Gertrude, who was very young. The Imp's mother didn't believe in bringing up little boys in the city, so for most of the year they lived in a very pleasant suburb that was almost the country, coming to stay with Big Aunty for two months in the winter. The Imp was immensely impressed with the city, and was under particular obligation to it at this point in his history, having just received a magnificent sailor-suit with a tin whistle attachment which he was firmly convinced could never have been purchased at any shop at home. It was none of your ordinary blue flannel sailor-suits to wear at

The Imp's Christmas Dinner

the seaside in the summer, but a fine blue broad-cloth affair with neat anchors in black silk braid at various points, and the whistle already mentioned. Except for the unfortunate tendency of the family to burst into nautical songs at his approach and the persistence of his Uncle Stanley in shouting "Ay, ay, sir!" whenever he spoke, the Imp enjoyed this garment greatly.

In a conversation with the waitress as to its merits, he was greatly interested to learn that in a certain shop downtown there was a whole room of such suits, many of them white, with gold braid.

"I should like to see 'em," he remarked. The waitress passed this by discreetly and turned the subject.

"I want to see 'em, Maggie," he added firmly. Maggie shook her head decidedly.

"We ain't to take you into stores, you know, Master Perry," she reminded him. "We'll go out if you want, though."

In previous dealings with Maggie, who shared with the housemaid the supervision of the Imp when he was left alone, since he did not really need a nurse, being seven and accustomed to a great deal of freedom as to his comings and go-

The Imp's Christmas Dinner

ings at home, he had learned that persuasion was futile, but that argument often worked well.

"Only when you don't *have* to, Maggie," he explained. "Katy and I just *had* to go to a place, and we just *did*. For thread. We *had* to need it. So we went. And it was all right, Katy said. The reason why we can't, it's so's to get the air all the time."

"Very well, Master Perry, but we don't need a thing."

"Not a thing? Not a *little* thing, Maggie, where the suits live?"

Maggie softened. She was very fond of the Imp and the suits would amuse him.

"Why, I suppose we could get them towels to hem," she agreed. "We've got to have 'em soon, anyhow."

"Oh, yes!" cried the Imp, "I'm sure we need 'em, Maggie! I took our last towel this morning for the cat that I washed—I mean I tried to—" but Maggie's face did not invite further reminiscence of that little episode and he turned the subject.

It was a clear, cold day and the streets were crowded. The Imp swung along proudly, his

The Imp's Christmas Dinner

hands in his pockets, one fist tight about a five-dollar gold piece. He always insisted on emptying his bank whenever he went downtown, though he never spent anything. Nevertheless, the ceremony was invariably performed and the money refunded on his return. They did not walk very fast, for the Imp's legs were short, and he got out of breath if they hurried. But there was no great haste necessary, and so they admired at their leisure the ladies with violets in their jackets, the pretty little children, the brilliant shop-windows, and the general bustle and rush of New York.

In front of an enormous building that seemed to stretch over the whole block they paused, and Maggie said, sternly,

"Now you must just hold on tight to me, Master Perry, or I won't go in a step. Do you hear? If you let go you'll be lost, and I shan't know where to find you."

"Oh, yes, I'll hold on ! I'll hold on, Maggie !" he agreed. He meant it very sincerely, for the big crowd pouring out and in through the vestibule frightened him a little. There was the usual rush, for it was bargain day, and the clerks screamed "Cash ! Cash ! Caaash !" and the

The Imp's Christmas Dinner

cash-girls ran and dodged and pushed, and the women chattered, and the big bright counters seemed to rise and press against the Imp as he gazed and held Maggie's hand. He was half afraid and half delighted and very glad they had come. He followed Maggie's lead, not seeing her, not speaking to her, his eyes fascinated by the color and the motion. Through the winding, crowded little streets made by the counters they pushed their way, and before the lace counter Maggie paused to handle and price some great bargains. The intoxication of the shopper caught her, and she pushed and pulled the remnants and crowded the other women till the Imp grew horribly restless. He gave one or two little pulls at her hand, but she had long ago dropped his and only said, "In a minute, Master Perry, in a minute," till his wrath grew hot against her and he slipped over to get a nearer view of a wonderful revolving wheel of ribbons a little farther off. He looked back once apprehensively, but Maggie was engaged in pricing handkerchiefs, "slightly soiled, at greatly reduced values," and did not notice that he had left her.

The excitement of adventure seized him and

The Imp's Christmas Dinner

he struck off boldly into the crowd, wandering here and there where the pressure drove him, his hands in his pockets, his head well back, his pea-jacket buttoned up to his throat, his sailor-cap tipped to one side, a genial and inquiring smile on his handsome little face. The ladies behind the counters smiled at him, the mothers with children of their own in tow wondered audibly if he were lost ; but his look was so confident that no one spoke to him, and he revelled in the independence and excitement of the occasion, with slight concern for Maggie, whose mind found its satisfaction in old handkerchiefs.

At his right rose a shrill impatient cry : "Cash ! Here, cash !" A very handsome young lady with marvellously dressed hair and a very small waist was calling and looking fiercely at a slow little girl in a crumpled black sateen apron, who idled along, vigorously chewing gum, tossing her short pig-tails and looking saucily at the young lady. "Hurry, cash !" snapped the clerk, but the little girl pretended to tie her shoe, and kneeled down near the Imp, setting her flat basket by his feet. A tall straight man standing by a pillar turned suddenly and looked at them. The little girl had

The Imp's Christmas Dinner

finished her shoe and was looking with interest at the Imp, who returned her stare with a pleasant smile. She looked very much like a little girl he knew at home, only her hair was redder and curlier, and the Imp loved red-haired people even at the age of seven and a half, a taste he never lost in after life. They smiled at each other, and the Imp had just said, "Hello!" when the tall man walked up to them.

"Get up immediately and hurry up—you're wanted," he said severely. The little girl pouted and scowled as much as she dared.

"I was just tyin' m' shoe," she mumbled.

"No answering back," he said crossly. "You dawdle half your time, I don't doubt."

The little girl slunk away with a very angry look and presented her basket to the young lady behind the counter. The Imp followed her, immensely interested. She darted away with a basketful of little fluffy things and the Imp ran after her. Into an elevator she jumped and then he lost her. But as he waited disconsolately where she had entered the little square room that sailed up and down, it came back again and she appeared. As his face lit up with the

The Imp's Christmas Dinner

unexpected pleasure she grinned familiarly at him.

"Hello!" she said.

"Hello!" returned the Imp. She shook her pigtails back and began a question, when he saw her eyes grow big with apprehension.

"Come on! Come on!" she gasped, and seizing his hand she ducked under the outstretched, bundle-filled arms of an old lady and pulled the Imp after her, only giving him time to see approaching her, with anger in his eye, the same tall straight gentleman who had scolded her before. Whether they were followed or not the Imp did not know, for they ran so quickly and turned and dodged so successfully that in a few moments they were in an entirely new part of the big store, full of Japanese goods. The Imp was all eyes for the red and blue and purple and yellow that covered banners and parasols and fans. A quaint, sweet odor came from everything, and fewer people crowded the narrow little lanes.

"Who is he?" gasped the Imp, terribly confused and out of breath.

"Floor'ker," responded his companion briefly.

"Nasty thing!"

The Imp's Christmas Dinner

The Imp had never heard of a floor-walker, but he nodded comprehendingly.

"Oh! A flawker," he said. "Is he horrid?"

"He's a pig," said the little girl.

"Sadie! Oh, Sadie!"

Coming towards them with a small parasol and a Japanese gong under her arm and an empty basket on her head, like a little Italian, was another little girl in a black sateen apron and pigtails.

"Wha'cher want?" she said, looking with some interest at the Imp.

"Will you take these to Miss Murphy at the ribbon counter? I daresn't go near it—Wicks is mad at me again."

"He's mad at me too," objected Sadie. "I sass'd him Tuesday and he was hoppin' mad. Are you takin' back the kid?"

"Yes," said the other girl promptly. "He's lost."

It struck the Imp for the first time that this was a fact. He was lost, and as the idea came over him with full force and he imagined Maggie hunting vainly for her little boy, his chin quivered and the gorgeous lantern above his head grew blurred for a moment.

The Imp's Christmas Dinner

"Oh, we'll find her—we'll find her," cried his friend hastily. "We always find 'em! Where was you when you lost her? Near the ribbons?"

But the Imp checked himself quickly. "I guess so—I was holding Maggie's hand and she—she let go—no, I let go——"

"Where was you?" said Sadie persistently; "near the ribbons?"

"No," said the Imp thoughtfully, "it was near the bargains."

The little girl laughed and ran off with the two baskets, and his friend sat down comfortably under a big parasol hung with lanterns.

"It's no good for us to move," she said. "Sadie'll tell 'em where we are. Once me and another kid chased ourselves all 'round the place with his mother chasin' after us. We'll stay right here. Was it your mother?"

"'Course not!" responded the Imp, indignantly, "mamma's off to make a call with Big Aunty. It was Maggie."

"Oh, well, she'll come, you just see! She'll come!"

"Yes, she'll come!" repeated the Imp contentedly; "she'll come!"

The Imp's Christmas Dinner

So they sat, a funny little pair, under the big umbrella, the little sailor-boy and the cash-girl; and being of a sociable nature, they exchanged experiences. The little girl, whose name was Jenny, seemed strangely ignorant of all the Imp's affairs and had never met his Uncle Stanley. Nor did she know where he lived, though the Imp explained that they were a lot of brown houses all close to each other with steps going up.

"O my! there's lots o' them!" she said easily, and the Imp felt that she knew a great deal and could probably take him home herself if she chose to trouble about it.

She was very glad of a rest, she said, because she had trotted all day, and the floor'ker had lost whatever temper he had, and Miss Murphy had cried, he'd talked so nasty to her, and the whole place was wild at Henderson, he'd discharged so many for complaining. But he'd see! He'd see! Here Jenny hugged herself and rocked back and forth with delight.

"What is it? What is it?" said the Imp, excitedly.

"I mustn't tell a soul," said Jenny, "not a soul.

The Imp's Christmas Dinner

Miss Murphy says she's sorry for George Scott, 'cause he'll lose more than Henderson."

"What'll he lose?" said the Imp with interest, "what'll Uncle George lose?"

"Oh, 'tain't your uncle," replied Jenny. "It's Scott that owns the place. Miss Murphy says that if he knew maybe it would be different; but he's off South—he don't know what Wicks and Henderson do."

"My Uncle George is back. He isn't South any more," announced the Imp. "I saw him this morning. He was eating his breakfast."

"Oh, well, this one I mean is South," Jenny returned hastily. "Maybe he'd want the dinner, Miss Murphy says."

"Dinner? dinner?" queried the Imp.

"A Christmas dinner for us all," explained Jenny. "Like J. P. Williams does for his clerks."

"Oh!" said the Imp, with interest. "Cranberry and turkey and all the people?" Jenny nodded.

"And lunch in the store like Smith's, holiday time."

The Imp couldn't exactly see why one's family and grandfather from the country and Uncle

The Imp's Christmas Dinner

Henry from the West should go to a store to have lunch, but he nodded.

"And a tree?" he asked.

Jenny shook her head. "I guess not a tree," she said regretfully. "Miss Murphy doesn't care for a tree."

The Imp disagreed with Miss Murphy and said as much. He was, nevertheless, interested in the great surprise in store for Mr. Henderson and Mr. Scott in the South, and though Jenny's explanations were extremely vague to his mind, he got a vivid picture of Mr. Henderson and "Wicks" running about in an empty store, trying to serve all the customers alone. He had a keen sense of humor, and this amused him greatly. He chuckled to himself as Jenny described their rage and despair, and he asked her what the great Miss Murphy would do then.

"Oh, she'll be all right," said Jenny, "she'll be all right. She knows what she'll do. She's got another place."

The little cash-girl felt very important and chattered all that she had heard, and the Imp listened vaguely, watching the clerks and the people, very interested in what he saw, and really paying atten-

The Imp's Christmas Dinner

tion only when Jenny gave some particularly vindictive representation of how angry "Wicks" would be.

But at last he grew restless and tired. And Jenny "found her hands full," as she said, to entertain him. Also her conscience smote her for not having taken him long ago to the room where the clerks had instructions to bring lost children, and she was afraid that even her good friend Miss Murphy would be very angry with her for wasting so much time. She knew that the employees in the Japanese department would have sent her about her business long ago if she had not been so open in her attentions to the little boy that they believed her under orders to amuse him while his people were found. So she was glad enough when Sadie ran up to her to say that a nurse was crying for a little boy in a blue sailor-suit in the ladies' waiting-room, and that Jenny was greatly in demand, as the crowd was greater than ever.

"I told 'em at the lace counter that Wicks had sent you on an errand, but Miss Ferris is awful mad," she said, hurrying them along. "She says she's got to have more help or she can't keep her cash-book straight."

The Imp's Christmas Dinner

The little girls gossiped together and elbowed the crowd and chewed gum vigorously, and the Imp felt very lonely and frightened by the time they dropped him in the ladies' waiting-room and he ran into Maggie's arms, crying loudly when he saw her own frightened, tear-stained face. She did not scold, for she knew it had all been her fault, but she said sorrowfully, "I've been an hour hunting for you, Master Perry," and as he begged her pardon in his best manner she answered him very kindly and only hoped that he'd say nothing about it to anyone. This he readily promised, and they went home, subdued but grateful that a kind Providence had thrown them together again.

Nobody was at home but Uncle Stanley, and he entertained his nephew till dinner-time, when the Imp ordinarily went to bed. But a great desire to converse with his very favorite Uncle George led him to beg for a half-hour after dinner with that gentleman. His own tea had made him very drowsy, and when Uncle George came into the library the Imp was almost asleep in the big chair. Uncle George was not alone, and a little slender man who preceded him almost sat

The Imp's Christmas Dinner

on the Imp, who uncurled himself with a sniff and stared at the visitor. Uncle George laughed.

"Only my nephew, Henderson," he said. "I'm afraid you'll have to run along, Imp, I'm very busy to-night."

The Imp pricked up his ears. "Is it the one that's going to have to tie up all the bundles himself?" he asked with interest. And as both men stared he added politely, "I mean with Wicks—he and Wicks together."

"What do you mean?" asked his uncle laughingly.

"When they strike, you know," said the Imp, looking inquiringly from one to the other. "There won't be anybody else—not a body. He'll have to run pretty fast—he's so small."

Mr. Henderson stared harder at the rumpled little boy with the sleep yet in his brown eyes. Uncle George picked him up and said:

"What do you know of a strike, Perry? Where did you ever hear of one?"

"It isn't when you hit anybody," explained the Imp eagerly. He had labored under that delusion at first himself, and he sympathized with his hearers. "You all go away from the store and don't

The Imp's Christmas Dinner

come back, so then all the people come to buy the things and nobody's there to give 'em to 'em. See?"

"When does this happen?" said Uncle George, in a queer way. "Where did you hear it?"

"At holiday time, Jenny says, but only some people know about it. It's to spite Henderson and Wicks. They'll have to tie up the bundles," said the Imp sleepily.

"This is absurd," said the little man angrily. "The child has been hoaxed, Mr. Scott."

"Where have you been, Perry?" said Uncle George quietly.

"In a big store where Wicks is, and white sailor-suits like mine—but I never saw 'em, never!" answered the Imp sadly.

"Who told you that there would be a strike?" asked the little man crossly.

"Jenny," replied the Imp simply. "Miss Murphy made it up. Henderson was nasty to her."

The little man flushed. "This is absurd," he said angrily. "There's no truth in it, Mr. Scott, and if there were, we can get plenty of people——"

"Oh, no, you can't!" interrupted the Imp

The Imp's Christmas Dinner

quickly. "No, you can't! There won't be anybody. They aren't going till late——"

"How late?" asked Uncle George.

"Oh—late," said the Imp vaguely. "An' all the other stores will have the other people. They're going to another place."

"Where?" asked Uncle George. He held the Imp tight and looked rather sternly at him.

"To Ferris's, in Brooklyn," said the Imp promptly.

"It's a lie!" the little man burst out. "Ferris has enough clerks!"

"He's bought a new store," said the Imp, whom the heat of the open fire was making sleepier than ever. "Miss Murphy told him about the clerks an' he wants 'em. He hates Henderson, too. Henderson is too fresh," he explained drowsily.

"I cannot stay any longer to be insulted, Mr. Scott," began Mr. Henderson angrily, but Mr. Scott had risen, and still holding the Imp looked sternly down at him.

"I think you had better stay, Henderson," he remarked calmly, "there may be something to be done yet. It's not too late."

"You don't mean you believe all that tomfool-

The Imp's Christmas Dinner

ery, Scott?" demanded the little man. "Why, it's utterly impossible that I shouldn't have known of all this—utterly impossible! It would be all over the place in a day!"

"Nobody knows at all," murmured the Imp to himself, "nobody at all. Jenny listened, so she found out. Just the day before, they're going. Ferris will take them. He's a Jew, and he hates Henderson. Miss Murphy will be the head one. She's sorry for Scott. He's South. She says maybe he'd do something if he knew——"

"What do they want?" said Uncle George, shaking the Imp, to open his eyes.

"Oh! you pulled my hair! I want to go to bed! I want Maggie!" cried the Imp fratchily. Uncle George soothed him and gave him his gold watch to play with. "In a minute, Boy. Just tell me what they want," he said pleasantly.

"A Christmas tree! And lunch with grandfather in the store! And longer time to rest!" snapped the Imp.

And as the two men scowled at each other he shook his head at his own confusion. "I mean they *don't* want a tree!" he cried. "They want a dinner like—like the other man gave the clerks,

The Imp's Christmas Dinner

and they want a lunch in the store an', an'— " here an enormous yawn choked him and his head fell forward sleepily.

" Do you know anything about this, Henderson ? " asked Uncle George.

Mr. Henderson shifted his gaze and twisted in the chair he had dropped into. " I believe there was some petition or other as to a lunch served in the store during the holiday season and a longer intermission," he said in a low voice, " and Wickham tells me that the girls, especially, feel angry because Williams has given his clerks a Christmas dinner occasionally. But it is a privilege which I felt I could grant or not as I chose, and the expense would be very considerable, as the year has been fairly hard. Moreover, there has been a great deal of insubordination and I have had to discharge—— "

The Imp opened his eyes. " Henderson has discharged lots of 'em—lots ! " he said cheerfully. " If they open their mouth he fires 'em ! "

Mr. Henderson gasped. The Imp looked curiously at him.

" How do you fire 'em—like an air-pistol ? " he inquired. He did not notice if Mr. Henderson

The Imp's Christmas Dinner

answered, for sleep overcame him finally, and with a vague murmur of sailor-suits and lanterns and Maggie's bargains he drifted off, only mentioning the name of Wicks and later drawling in a whisper, "tie up all the bundles—tie up all the bundles——"

The firm of Henderson was engaged in business till very late that night, the silent partner with his nephew still in his arms. Mr. Henderson seemed very greatly shaken and very deeply impressed, and as he stood in the vestibule and George Perry Scott, six feet in his stockings, handsome and gray-haired, delivered a final charge that ended with "spare no expense," he nodded his head thoughtfully.

"Maybe you're right, maybe you're right, Scott," he said slowly. "I never take any stock in rumors, but maybe you're right. It would be a nasty time to lose them, and as you say, we should be severely crippled for a week at least. And I'll send Wickham away. He's strict, but I thought that was just as well. As for Miss Murphy, I can't deny she's a fine woman, but—still if a dinner will make it all right, I guess we can afford it."

The Imp's Christmas Dinner

"How many of the little girls that carry the baskets have you?" said Mr. Scott abruptly. "Poor little devils—it's a nasty life for them. Suppose we give 'em a tree?"

Mr. Henderson gasped but said nothing. "I think we'll do that," said his partner comfortably. "You can say you thought of it yourself, Henderson, and by Jove, it may make you popular! Mind you don't forget it, now! I may happen in myself. Good-night!"

And he carried his nephew upstairs himself, and at his sleepy request undressed him, even to spreading the sailor-suit carefully across the bed, according to its owner's directions. And he laughed to himself as he thought how the "society member" and his namesake had managed the affairs of J. W. Henderson.

But his laughter was as nothing to the mighty burst of delight that greeted the Imp on Christmas afternoon, when his uncle and he entered the great armory hung with evergreen and holly, filled with long tables, resounding with the clatter of the tongues of J. W. Henderson's employees. From the head book-keeper, whose salary exceeds most college professors', to the little boys

The Imp's Christmas Dinner

who open the doors as you enter the building's vestibules, they were all there, seated about the closely laid tables, waiting for the feast. In some mysterious way the whole affair had leaked out, and everybody knew perfectly well that it was to the small brown person in a blue sailor-suit they owed this dinner, and more than the dinner, the hot lunch at noon and the extra half-hour at supper-time that had made the holiday season the easiest they had ever known. They knew, as who does not, George Perry Scott, tall and handsome in his great ulster, and they felt, each one, that once in such close connection with them, the society member would not forget them in a hurry. He was only careless, not really uninterested, and queerly enough they liked him none the less for that. And it would be a hard heart that could not feel kindly toward this cherubic sailor-boy who, unafraid and confident in all the uproar, trotted down the hall, dragging the silent partner behind him, to where around two tables sat a crowd of little cash-girls blissfully awaiting their turn, and stopping before a red-haired, chattering child announced cheerfully, "It *was* this Scott, you see, Jenny, and he isn't

The Imp's Christmas Dinner

South at all ! He's the one ! He owns half of the sailor-suits ! ”

Although the fact was not so astonishing to the little girls as it had been to the Imp, it yet had its effect, and the noise about the tables redoubled when at his request the Imp sat between Jenny and her friend and waited with interest for his dinner ! He had been far too excited to eat any at home, and the knowledge of what was coming later kept him dancing on his seat with impatience through the long feast.

Mr. Scott had a very pressing engagement and could stay only long enough to make a little speech of welcome in the name of the firm, thanking them for their promptness and energy during the holiday-time, which, with an almost entire absence of friction, had, he said, more than offset the loss of the half-hour at supper-time. He would try in the future to keep in closer touch with his business interests than before, and thus relieve Mr. Henderson, whose utmost care had not been able hitherto to discharge such heavy responsibilities. And he wished them a very merry Christmas !

He went out in a storm of applause, and the waiters began to scurry about. And then it was

The Imp's Christmas Dinner

like any other enormous dinner, full of delicious savory-smelling courses and noisier even than the millinery department on a bargain day.

The Imp sat and chatted like the sociable fearless little being that he was, only hinting at intervals of a glory yet to come. When the raisins and nuts and little cups of coffee were before the company, and the chatter and clamor had sunk to a drowsier pitch, the big double doors that led to the officers' room were flung open, and full in sight of the little cash-girls' table stood the tree ! A monster it was, all covered with lights and popcorn and threaded cranberries and gold and silver paper ! There was a hush and then a gasp of delight from the children, with a clapping and cheering from the others. The head book-keeper mounted his chair and announced briefly that Mr. Scott desired him to say that this tree was the suggestion and gift of his nephew, Perry Scott Stafford, and then amid a deafening cry of "Speech ! speech !" the Imp was lifted to the middle of the table before he knew it.

"What—what for ?" he gasped at the head book-keeper, who whispered softly, "Say something, you know !"

The Imp's Christmas Dinner

"What'll I say?" he whispered back, and as the book-keeper answered that he need only tell them something about the tree, and as he had not had time to be really frightened, the Imp actually lifted up his voice and made his speech.

"It's for the little girls that run around with the baskets—it's a s'prise. I had a tree, too, but not so big! I—I—Oh! *I'm* to take 'em to 'em myself! Stop! Stop!"

For he had seen one of the waiters pull a small box from a low branch and hand it to a little girl dancing with impatience beside him. And so they got no more speeches from the Imp. But they had all seen him, which was the main thing, and they cheered him wildly as he scrambled from the table and dashed toward the tree, to wait upon the little cash-girls.

He gave his mother a graphic description of the whole affair as he lay, red with the excitement of it all, in his white little bed that night.

"There were millions—millions of 'em!" he said placidly, "millions of thousands! All eating their dinner! They said, 'Hurrah for George Scott! Hip, hip, hurrah!'"

"Lie down, Perry dear——"

The Imp's Christmas Dinner

"And that was Uncle George! I said it too; I said 'Hurrah!'"

"Perry, you *must* be still and go to sleep, dear!"

"Well, all right. But listen—listen here! Do you think Henderson and Wicks could have tied up all those bundles, all alone!"

"Of course not. Now lie——"

"Well, that's what I said. I said they wouldn't have tied up half—not half!"

So he went to sleep to dream it all over again. And they put him in the papers, speech and all, which nearly broke his mother's heart, but which pleased him mightily. And while to him it was merely the jolliest kind of a party and a fine frolic, there are those who insist that the phenomenal success of J. W. Henderson's mammoth establishment dates from that hour, and that without the Imp's unforeseen visit in the fall of 188—, that remarkable sympathy between the heads of the firm and the employees, which is the envy of all the other New York houses, would never have been established, and the consequent zeal of every person in the great store, from the elevator-boys to the head book-keeper, would not exist to-day to make it what it is, the model house of the city.

THE IMP DISPOSES

THE IMP DISPOSES

NOTHING was so pleasing to the Imp as an invitation to accompany Miss Eleanor on some expedition or other. He adored her, and her conquest was the more noteworthy in that her hair was not red, but a dark, dark brown. Generally speaking the Imp lost his heart to red-haired femininity. There was the little cash-girl in the department store, there was—but the list could only cover the ladies with embarrassment and serves no present end. When it comes to that, who cares a particle where the snows of yesterday may be? It is polite, doubtless, to bewail them, but like most polite performances, hollow at the core.

Enough that since that hot afternoon when, weary and cross with a long stage drive the Imp had stumbled up the steps of the hotel piazza and bumped into a brilliant scarlet dress so violently that it collapsed with him and they sank to the floor together, he had worshipped the dress and

The Imp Disposes

the wearer. On that occasion he had been drenched in mortification. He had hardly dared to lift his eyes above the waist of the scarlet dress. In fact he burrowed obstinately into the lap of it and refused to move. As he lay there, sobbing with rage and shame and sleepiness, clutching a ruffle like grim death, utterly oblivious to the hasty rush of masculine feet, the pulling of feminine fingers, the anxious "Has he hurt you? Let me help you up! Come here, child—let go!" he felt his hot little hand actually strengthened in its grasp on the ruffle by a cool, soft one, that came from under a surge of scarlet; he heard above the confusion a voice very near his own bowed head, a voice not rough, but with a strange sweet little shake in it that made the other women's voices sound high and thin.

"Let us alone, please! Don't you see how mortified we are? Please go away! We can help each other up, can't we, Boy?"

When angels out of heaven speak, it is in that tone, beyond the shadow of a doubt.

As the Imp lay there, and the footsteps gradually retreated, the murmur of voices softened, he became aware that the air around him was

The Imp Disposes

strangely sweet. His nose, pressed against the scarlet crêpe, sniffed inquiringly, his head raised a little. Instantly another cool hand slipped under his neck and he was pulled a little higher into the red lap. At first he resisted, but as the hand pressed his head closer, again he wriggled up involuntarily—it was sweeter yet! Up among a nest of fluffy softness it was sweetest of all, and there the Imp hid his head. Later he stole a glance at her chin, which was very close, and as she was absolutely silent, he even went so far as her nose. Still she made no sign. The Imp felt a flood of renewed self-respect rise within him. He drew a long sigh, lifted his eyes and faced her.

Then he realized that he had known her always—she lived in a picture frame in his Aunt Gertrude's room.

“Oh, do you live here?” he said wonderingly.

She nodded. “Will you help me up?” she asked in a matter-of-fact way, and he scrambled up and benevolently assisted her. He had really forgotten how she came to fall. I cannot describe her any better.

From time to time he heard strange things said of her. Grown people express themselves most

The Imp Disposes

oddly, when you consider their remarks seriously. The very day after the scene I have described, as he was waiting for the luncheon bell to ring, he heard two ladies discussing her.

“Ah, she’s perfectly wonderful, my dear, beyond a doubt. Do you know another woman who’d have carried an affair off like that? To be butted down before a whole piazza-full! I should have died at her age.”

“And the way she sat and held him, afterward! The men went perfectly wild over it. Mr. Florian took a snap-shot of it, they tell me. He mounted it, and wrote *The Madonna of the Piazza* under it, and sent it to her after breakfast.”

“Well, she did look very sweet sitting there. Her skirt fell very well. It’s the accordeon-pleating, I suppose.”

“Yes. Mr. Bishop said this morning that he understood Turkish furnishing as never before. He said that if women knew more they’d sit on the floor more—what do you think of that, my dear?”

“Oh, well, she’s simply done herself good by it, instead of being made ridiculous, as any one else would have been. The men like her even better.”

The Imp Disposes

That evening the Imp annoyed his mother by replying calmly, when she chided him for tagging about after Miss Eleanor too much—his devotion was scandalous—"Oh, it didn't hurt her; she said she was all right. She told you herself. And anyway, it did her good."

"Did her good! What on earth do you mean?"

"The men like her better!"

"Good heavens! Do you suppose, Donald, we can get our cottage next week? If we have to stay here much longer I sha'n't dare let that child out of my sight!"

A rule was finally announced that threatened to darken his days for the rest of the summer, had he not been confident of Miss Eleanor's assistance in the matter. He was not to follow her about without an invitation. When the young gentleman in white flannels, and Mr. Florian with his everlasting camera, and Mr. Bishop, who said such foolish things that the best thing to do was to turn away with dignity and let the rest laugh if they wished, and Mr. Hunter, who played the guitar when *she* asked, but would never so much as imitate a drum on the bass strings for the Imp

The Imp Disposes

—when all these, I say, gathered round her and shuffled each other about and suggested errands for each other and the Imp, he was not to worm his way through the group and cuddle her hand and grin at them triumphantly. Personal and particular summons must precede such action on his part.

So he lurked on the outside of the ring that always surrounded her and cast such glances as would have melted a harder heart than the one that beat under the sweet-smelling red chiffons. Sometimes on such occasions she would single him out and they would start for a walk alone, the group dissolving behind her as quickly as it had formed. And this, as I said, was particularly pleasing to the Imp.

To-day, however, things went wrong in the very beginning. Miss Eleanor had a headache and asked him please not to step *all* the time on her skirt; he had been sent from the breakfast-table for rudeness to the waiter, which rankled still at ten o'clock; it appeared that their walk was to end at the big tree half way through the wood that separated the North Beach from the South Beach. This was hardly enough to stretch



So he lurked on the outside of the ring that always surrounded her.

THE NEW YORK
PUBLIC LIBRARY

ASTOR LENOX TILDEN FOUNDATION
100 N. 4th St. New York, N.Y.

The Imp Disposes

one's legs—and he had boasted to one of his friends that he would have walked all of three miles, probably, before his return! So when Miss Eleanor stopped under the big tree, sat down, and took out a book, he groaned aloud with disgust and disappointment.

“Dear, dear!” she said, sitting back comfortably, “you sigh as if you were in love! Not that I ever knew anybody to sigh under such circumstances—it's indigestion mostly, they say. Are you in love?”

“Huh?” said the Imp inquiringly.

“Because if you are, I am sorry for you,” she went on. “It's not worth it, Perry, take my word for it.”

“I love cream,” announced the Imp, with a reminiscent glare—it was in the matter of cream that he and the waiter had recently disagreed. Miss Eleanor laughed.

“Cream!” she said. “A good, safe object, I'm sure. Stick to it, dear, and be happy. If it isn't so exciting at first, at least it isn't horrid and troublesome at the end. It has no nasty, suspicious tempers—not that tempers are the worst things in the world. It's far worse to have them

The Imp Disposes

and control them. To be sarcastic and cool—Oh, so cool!”

“Ice-cream is cold,” said the Imp argumentatively, “dreadful cold. But I love it, just the same. I love it more. It stings my eyes and aches my nose—the top part—and I us’ally scream right out. We have it here quite often, don’t we?”

“Coldness is all very well in ice-cream, but very different in—in other things one likes—has liked,” Miss Eleanor continued decidedly. “*You* aren’t blamed if it is cold. You aren’t informed that so long as you act as—as you *do* act it will continue to be cold—as if you were a child of twelve! If ice-cream is cold, it’s not your fault.”

“’Tis too,” rejoined the Imp stubbornly, “if you freeze it! It don’t freeze itself, does it?”

“Ah!” said Miss Eleanor softly, “Ah-h!” as if it hurt her to breathe.

“Let it alone, if you don’t want it to freeze,” pursued the Imp instinctively. He had no idea what they were talking about, but he was not by way of analyzing conversational plans; he took sentences as he found them. Indeed, experience had taught him that this was his only

The Imp Disposes

practical method of joining a general conversation. Questions or contradictions were fatal to his social schemes. In order to avoid the subsequent embarrassment of suppression or even expulsion, he had become an adept at plunging directly up to his neck in the stream of talk, dispensing easily with preliminary assumptions and final conclusions.

“ Did you know that the ice they put around the thing that holds it while it’s freezing is awful to eat ? ” he added confidentially. “ I always eat out of the ice-cart at home, while the man is taking it in the house—little bits on the floor of the wagon, you know. You can lick off the sawdust and they taste very good. Last Sunday morning I took a few little pieces out of one of those tall red pails out in the back—” he paused and scowled reminiscently, “ I had to swallow them, because I began to, but they made me feel awfully—awfully ! ”

Miss Eleanor was looking over his head, through the wood. Her eyes were very soft and dark. She made no reply and he knew perfectly that she had not been listening. His sense of ill-treatment returned.

The Imp Disposes

"I don't think it's any fun to sit still here!" he burst out. "You said you'd walk, and you aren't walking, and you don't talk, either. If Mr. Florian was here, with that camera, you'd talk! If Mr. Hunter was here——"

"Perry Stafford, you are a very disagreeable little boy, and a saucy one, too," interrupted Miss Eleanor coldly. He started—not at her words, he knew his conduct occasionally merited reproach—but at her tone. He had never heard that tone from her. It was like that of a great many other people: it indicated that he and she were of different sorts—she a grown person, he the kind of creature known as a little boy. His lip quivered, he rubbed his shoes together till they squeaked again.

"For heaven's sake, Perry, stop that hideous noise!" she cried nervously. "I should *not* talk if Mr. Florian were here! I came out here to get away from him, and all the others, too. I am to go, I suppose, all my life, with my mouth closed and my eyes shut. Of course if I laugh and talk, I am perfectly happy! Of course, because I don't snap people up and act like a bear, I am the greatest flirt that ever lived. Of course

The Imp Disposes

I care for nothing but admiration and flattery !
Oh, what fools men are !”

Miss Eleanor’s cheeks were very red, she breathed deep and looked so strangely at the Imp that he felt actually embarrassed, and dropped his eyes to his offending boots.

“Not that I care,” she added in a lower voice, “not that I care at all. Naturally I couldn’t, being perfectly heartless and preferring the admiration of a dozen men to the—Oh, dear ! I wish I had never been born !”

At this point she slipped down under the tree, turned over with her face on her arms and lay perfectly still.

The Imp regarded her for a moment, but as she paid no attention to him and seemed to be asleep, he got up softly and walked away on his tiptoes. He felt distinctly depressed. So low, indeed, were his spirits, that he utterly forgot that he was every minute moving farther away from the big tree that a too-thoughtful Providence seemed to have established at just the point to satisfy his mother’s idea of a boundary to his unaccompanied strolls.

A passing chipmunk caught his eye and he

The Imp Disposes

instinctively stepped out of the beaten track to follow it. It went very slowly, so that one's hand was almost close to it before it gave a little bound and escaped. It was evidently lame, and the hope of capturing it and teaching it tricks in a cage lured the Imp from the path and duty alike, and it was only after an hour of wandering that he woke up to the fact that he was a lost and culpable boy. He called to mind the tales of people who had been lost in these woods and how they had gone round and round helplessly, always coming out just where they started. He remembered the bear that once lived there. True, it was many, many years ago—perhaps a hundred—but who knew how long a bear might live? A friend of his had assured him that a very fierce animal would become as gentle as a kitten if you stared straight into its eyes and showed no fear; but the Imp greatly doubted his ability to do this. It was appallingly quiet in these woods: hardly a leaf stirred. It occurred to the Imp that in just about three seconds he should feel quite certain he was lost and behave accordingly, when he heard a faint sound of tramping through the undergrowth.

The Imp Disposes

It drew nearer ; it turned aside ; it was growing fainter——

“ Oh ! come here ! come here ! ” cried the Imp desperately. The footsteps ceased utterly.

“ Call again ! ” shouted a deep voice.

“ O-o-o-o-o-h-h-h— ! ” trumpeted the Imp like a frightened foghorn, too excited to stop even when a tall man hurried through the trees and shook him rapidly to stop the amazing noise.

“ There, there ! It’s all right—let up on that yelling ! It’s really almost unnecessary, I assure you,” he begged. “ We’re saved—land is in sight ! ” And he hurried the breathless Imp off to the left. The exigencies of the human mechanism forced his captive to fill his lungs, and by the time he had recovered himself they were in sight of another road and another centre of civilization.

It was a solitary house, built like an enormous log cabin of rough timbers. But it was far from rough in other respects. Wide piazzas with polished floors ran all round it ; hammocks and bright rugs, tables filled with books and pipes, two beautiful golden setters and an enormous bull-dog, gave it an air of great comfort. The

The Imp Disposes

man led the Imp up to one of the big willow chairs, plumped out the pillows that half filled it and waved his hand hospitably.

"Welcome to Benedick's Inn!" he said. "I gather that you have momentarily lost your bearings?"

"I lost the chipmunk," returned the Imp cautiously.

The man laughed. "Same thing," he said. "You came from the North Beach, I suppose?"

"I live in the hotel," replied the Imp with dignity. "It is bigger than this, a great deal."

"Ah?" said the man politely. "This is not a hotel, however. It is large enough for the Benedicks. And they do not give parties."

"Why not?" asked the Imp promptly. "We do, and we have ice-cream and lanterns."

"I don't doubt you do," rejoined the man, "and that is just what we wish to avoid. Ice-cream means women, and women mean trouble and dress clothes. We came here to be by ourselves and be happy. Perfectly happy. And we are, of course. We have not a care or sorrow. We dress not, neither do we dance. I for in-

The Imp Disposes

stance, *moi, qui vous parle*, am a perfectly happy man!"

"Humph!" said the Imp.

"Do you doubt it?" demanded his host. "Why that vague and scornful smile? You are too young to be cynical. Why should I not be happy? Have I not proved my point? Was I not perfectly right in the most important affair of my very important existence? You may be ignorant of the facts, but take my word for it, I was. I was wise in time. Is not that enough to make a man happy?"

For some reason this speech struck the Imp as humorous and he laughed, chewing the edge of his cap in his embarrassment.

"Good heavens! You doubt that, too?" cried the man. "What a generation is growing up under our nose! Allow me to show you this watch, by which you may judge, without trusting me to any degree whatever, that it is high time we started back for the North Beach if you want to dine there."

He laid an open watch ostentatiously in the Imp's lap. In the cover was a face the Imp knew well.

The Imp Disposes

"She don't know where I am!" he chuckled to himself.

"She! Who?" demanded the owner of the watch.

The Imp pointed to the picture. The man laughed loud and long.

"I don't believe she does," he said shortly. "Who do you think it is?"

"It is the Countess Potocka," he added after a pause, "and she cares very little, presumably, where you are—or where I am either! It is a famous picture. I love art, and therefore I am in the habit of associating myself with masterpieces."

"That's not her name at all," said the Imp, decidedly. His Aunt Gertrude had insisted on this very same thing with regard to the picture in her room, and it seemed to him a puerile attempt to confuse him. He knew well enough who it was.

"No? She lived under an assumed name, then?" inquired the man with a surprised air. "However, that is a pedantic distinction, as it is by that name she has become dear to so many of us. Don't disturb the popular idea, I beg of you!"

The Imp Disposes

He shut the watch and took an elaborate fishing-rod from a corner of the piazza.

"Come on," he said, holding out his hand, "we'll start, for I shouldn't wonder if you'd be in demand, a little later."

They struck out into the wood, hand in hand.

"I trust you left your friend the Countess in good health?" inquired the man.

There was in his question no apparent rudeness, but the Imp recognized the tone perfectly. His Uncle Stanley employed that tone very frequently.

"She was asleep," he returned briefly, and fingered the rod with deep admiration.

"Indeed! Is she as popular as ever? She is reported to have been very attractive to the men—like her namesake!" he added quickly. "Do they hover about her and paint her portrait and write waltzes for her? Poor men—what fools they are!"

"That's what she says," the Imp agreed.

The man stared at him.

"Oh, she does!" he said. "Well, she ought to know, I'm sure. And yet it seems rather unjust to make a man a fool and then laugh at

The Imp Disposes

him for it, doesn't it, now? Have you ever noticed that injustice is their most pronounced quality—always excepting their absurd attractiveness? 'Oh, yes, indeed,' they say, 'I love you, and you only, and since you know that, I feel perfectly free to reduce as many of your companions as possible to your state. If you object, you are ridiculously jealous.' Has that occurred to you, my young friend?"

"I am jealous," the Imp announced. "I am as jealous as can be. My mother says she should think I'd be yellow all over me, I'm so jealous. She says a little is all very well, but too much is childish. It tires anybody to death. They get cross."

"They do indeed," the man returned fervently. "They get almighty cross. That shows their conscience is not clear."

"It shows you don't deserve anybody to be nice to you," contradicted the Imp promptly. "So I don't go till I'm asked—I wait. But Mr. Florian never waits," he scowled. "Mrs. Bishop says she pities my wife," he concluded proudly.

The man burst out laughing.

The Imp Disposes

"She does, does she?" he said. "And why, in heaven's name?"

"Because I'm so jealous," replied the Imp, tranquilly. "She says an angel would get out of temper with me."

The man made no remark for some time after this. It was as well that he did not, for he strode along so fast that the Imp panted in his efforts to keep up, and would never have been able to answer any. Finally he spoke.

"Do you believe that?" he asked. "Do you believe that a fellow should put up with anything and everything?"

"Huh?" said the Imp.

"If the only girl you ever—if the Countess Potocka, we'll say—" here the Imp scowled again—"treated everybody just as she treated you—"

"But she don't, she *don't!*" interrupted the Imp, quite out of patience with the haste and the obstinate allusion to the Countess. "I can hold her hand, and wear her ring, and I can kiss her—if I'm good. Nobody else can. She *don't* treat me the same!"

The man stopped abruptly and drew a long

The Imp Disposes

breath. He shut his eyes and it seemed to the Imp that he stood still for an hour. Presently he appeared to wake up.

"Will you say that again?" he requested. The Imp stuck out his lip and started on by himself. This man was worse than his Uncle Stanley.

"I say she *don't* treat me the same!" he flung back. Suddenly he caught the glimmer of a red parasol.

"There she is! There's Miss Eleanor, now!" he cried.

The man dragged him back. The rod clattered to the ground.

"My good child," he said in a low, hurried voice, "will you be so exceptionally kind as to inform me if the person you refer to is called Miss Eleanor Whitney?"

"Yes, she is," grunted the Imp, struggling to escape. "You let me go, will you?"

"No," the man replied calmly, "not till I memorialize my gratitude and affection. Let me beg your acceptance," he continued, untwisting the Imp from around his legs and holding him fast with one hand while he picked up the fishing

The Imp Disposes

tackle with the other, "of this elegant rod and all its appurtenances. It seems to have caught your fancy, and if you will keep it intact for a few years, I assure you that your evident appreciation of its qualities will not diminish. For it is an excellent rod."

He handed it over with an unmistakable gesture, and the Imp, doubting the evidence of his senses, took it in silence.

They stepped out of the wood. Miss Eleanor's back was turned to them and only as they reached her did she lift her head.

"Oh, Elmer!" she cried softly, "how—where—"

The Imp dashed ahead and squatted down beside her.

"See what he gave me! I got lost and I was at a Benedick Inn, and you've been here all the time!"

"Eleanor," said the man, standing tall behind the Imp, "I was utterly and entirely wrong and unreasonable. I beg your pardon. An angel would have been out of temper with me."

"Oh, no!" said Miss Eleanor, softly, "no, indeed. Because I was. And I'm not an angel."

The Imp Disposes

Whatever you were that was—was not nice, I made you be. It was my fault.”

“Then—then—” the man stopped. He seemed to expect some remark, but none was forthcoming. Miss Eleanor patted the Imp’s brown little hand and stared at the rod.

“Won’t you be wanting your dinner?” asked the man abruptly, stooping down and lifting the Imp bodily from the ground. Grasping his rod the Imp started to explain that he would wait for Miss Eleanor, but when he looked around before resuming his seat beside her, it was gone.

“And when you *do* go,” continued the man easily, “don’t say anything about where we are, or anything at all, in fact,” he concluded sweepingly. “Can you keep a secret?”

“I’ll have to tell my mother about the rod,” the the Imp demurred.

“Oh, tell your nice mother about it all,” said Miss Eleanor—“I mean,” she added, “I mean—” the man caught her hand.

“Good-by!” he called to the Imp, “hurry up, or they’ll be through dinner—good-by!”

“But she wants her dinner, too,” began the Imp doubtfully. “I can wait a little longer—”

The Imp Disposes

“Good-by, Perry dear,” said Miss Eleanor decidedly, “I am very glad you came with me—good-by !”

He looked back once or twice hesitatingly, but they did not call him.

THE PRODIGAL IMP

THE PRODIGAL IMP

HE sat mournfully in the library, on the lowest stool he could find, and clasped his hands tightly over his brown corduroy knees. Occasionally he sniffed and winked rapidly. Not that he was crying—oh, no! A person who has worn corduroy trousers since Tuesday does not cry. But when one is about to leave forever—or for at least ten years, which amounts to the same thing—the home of his childhood, one may be pardoned if he loses control of himself so far as to sniff.

For he was going to run away. To-morrow at this time where should he be? He did not know: he only knew that he should not be with a household that might perhaps miss him when he was gone; here he winked very hard and felt for his pocket, the hip-pocket. Kittens, indeed! A boy of seven keeping kittens! He blushed for shame. He had only asked for three guinea-pigs—three little guinea-pigs; and they had been immediately and flatly refused.

The Prodigal Imp

“But what *can* I keep?” he had demanded. “Every boy keeps *something*!” And then they had offered kittens—the children of the cat in the next house, that he had known all his life, more or less! He had given way to one burst of temper, and rushed from the room; they had laughed. Now he was going away, but more in sorrow than in anger, truly.

He got up from the stool and went softly upstairs to his room. He looked sadly at the pretty white bed—it might be long before he should sleep in such a bed as that again! For he knew well that when knights and princes went forth to seek their fortunes and elude cruel guardians, they had troublesome if thrilling adventures, and often went for nights and days with little food or sleep, till the godmother came with the chariot and magic luncheon tray.

He shook his bank that looked like a little church, and with an ease born of long practice took off the bottom and gathered up the dimes and nickels. He knew just how much there was—one dollar and eighty-five cents if you counted the Canadian dime. He put the money into the left hip-pocket, where it rattled pleasantly, and

The Prodigal Imp

then he crushed his polo-cap on his curly head and left the room. With money in one's pocket, one feels less mournful.

At the top of the stairs he stopped and considered. It might be well to have some clean clothes, and at least a night-gown and a tooth-brush. His Uncle Stanley said that with a night-gown and a tooth-brush a man could start for China at any minute, and his Uncle Stanley was a very clever young man indeed. The Imp intended to go no farther than New York; still, the rule might hold.

But stop! Had any prince that he had ever heard of carried a night-gown when he left his father's palace where the older brothers laughed at him and the servants sneered, but he came back wealthy at last, and honorable, with the princess at his side, and they banished the brothers and ruled the country? No book that had been read to him ever so much as hinted at a night-gown, or a tooth-brush, for that matter. So with a sigh not wholly sorrowful, he abandoned the idea and turned again to go.

But his mother's reproachful eyes seemed to open wide before him, and he seemed to see

The Prodigal Imp

again the little white box with the cunning baby tooth-brush tied with white ribbon, that came on his fourth birthday. It was for him to use himself, and there was what he called a "pome" with it. Softly the Imp repeated the instructive verse to himself :

"Little Imps must brush their teeth,
Or else they will be dirty ;
And they should begin at four,
Not wait till four-and-thirty.
So mind you, Implet, every day,
Open your mouth and scrub away !"

Uncle Stanley made that "pome," and it was great in the eyes of the Imp. They had repeated it to him on those occasions when he had objected to the process it implied, and he had grown to reverence the brushing of teeth because of the beauty and dignity of the "pome."

So rolling it in a scrap of paper, he crowded his tooth-brush—it was almost new and very stiff—into the pocket of his blouse, and went down stairs. It was a small concession to his relatives, and no one could possibly know it was there.

He would not say good-by to them : his heart was too hot. And they would very probably

The Prodigal Imp

laugh, or worse than that, prevent his going. So he walked out of the house and down the path and out of the gate.

Good-by ! Good-by ! He almost forgave them in the sorrow and grandeur of the moment.

Suddenly a voice from the farther hammock :

“Where you going, Imp? After the kittens?” And then a chuckle—low, suppressed, but still a chuckle.

The heart of the Imp hardened. He would never come back—never ! He strode on, and made no answer. Kittens, forsooth ! As he passed by the house where the kittens lived he looked the other way.

It was half a mile to the station, and the Imp took the longest way, to avoid meeting friends or relatives who might be curious. He had never been in a station alone, and his heart thumped as he turned the brass knob and entered.

The New York express had just thundered in and stood waiting for its passengers ; but they were very few, for this was too late an hour for the business men and it was too warm a day for shoppers. Still, one man was getting a ticket in a hurry, and the Imp guessed that he was going

The Prodigal Imp

on that train, which was headed for New York, as he knew.

Everything fascinating in the way of toys and clothes came from New York, and when visitors came they usually got out of a car that had come from there. What better place to seek a fortune than that city of supplies and guests?

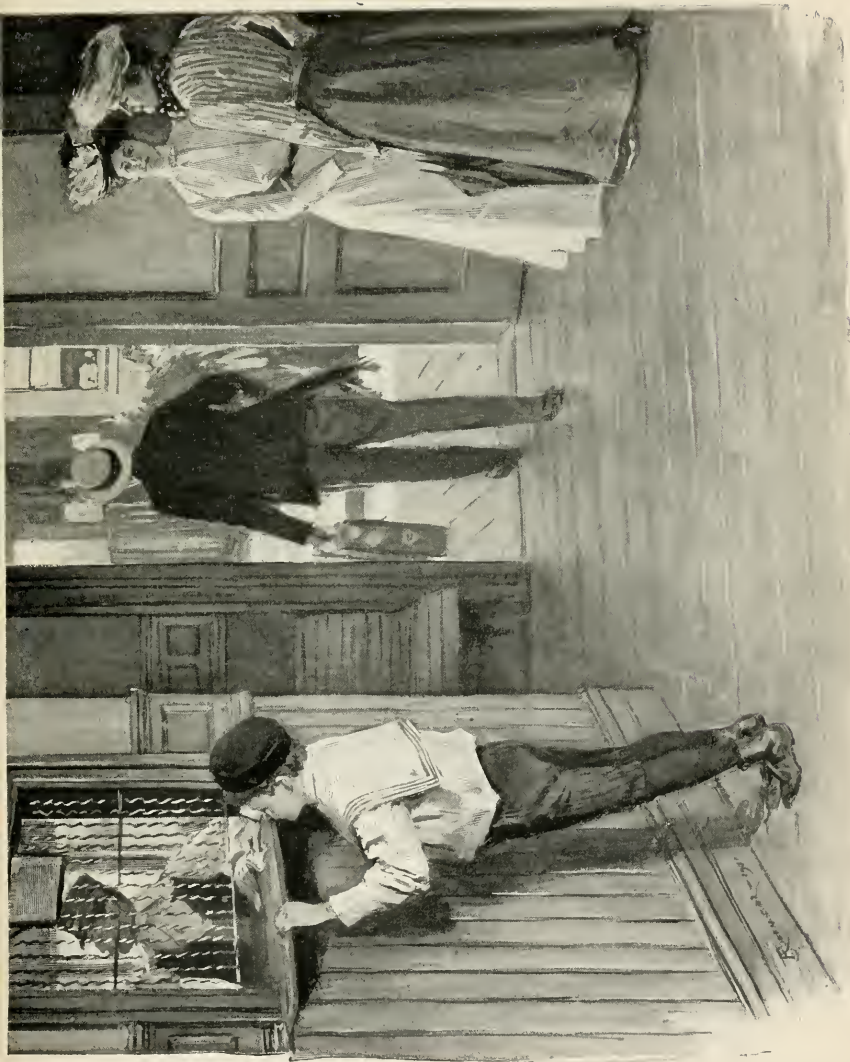
The Imp crept up behind the man and listened. How did men buy tickets?

"One for the city," said the man, and a little cardboard flew across the tiny counter to him as he put down a bill. Oh—it took a bill, then? The Imp felt in his left hip-pocket and drew out a soiled handkerchief, three jackstones, a plum, and a large, flat elastic band. Where was it? Had he lost it? Oh, no! Safe at the bottom lay a crumpled dollar bill.

He walked to the little window, which was almost above his head, and held up the bill.

"One for the city!" he said. All the station seemed to pause and listen; the scrub-woman, the half-dozen mothers with babies and bundles, and the paper-boy, all stopped, he thought, to hear him.

Probably he should not get a ticket. Probably



“One for the City,” he said.



The Prodigal Imp

that young man would throw back the bill and tell him to buy kittens with it! He started to sniff, and stopped, for over the little counter came the ticket and three dimes! The young man didn't know him, nor care whether he went to New York and never came back! He picked them up and scuttled off, fearful of being called back, but nobody noticed him.

Miss Katharine Sampson was standing near the door, and as he went out he heard her say to her friend,

"Why, see little Perry Stafford! He bought a ticket himself. Where is that baby going?"

The Imp swelled with rage. *That baby!*

"Oh, his mother's on the other side, of course," said the other young lady. "When I was a little tot I always loved to get the tickets myself."

The Imp smiled bitterly. When she was a little *tot!* Doubtless she had never worn corduroy trousers, however. And young ladies were only grown-up little girls. He boarded the train, taking care to go in a car that no one else from the station patronized, and his heart beat fast as he passed by the brakeman.

"Here! where's your ma?" said that official.

The Prodigal Imp

"My mamma is at home," responded the Imp with dignity, and went on.

"Humph!" said the brakeman, following him up the steps and giving him a kindly shove—the steps were far apart and the Imp's legs were short. "What's your name? Ain't anybody along with you?"

The Imp was horribly frightened: the hissing, pounding engine, the bell that clanged, the bustling people, all woke him to a sense of his strange position, and for a moment he heartily wished that someone *was* along with him. Then the chuckle from the hammock rang in his ears, and he stiffened, and faced the brakeman with all the dignity and haughtiness of his grandfather, who had publicly rebuked the Governor of Connecticut for a want of courtesy, and said:

"I am Perry Scott Stafford, and I am going to New York by myself."

"Oh!" said the brakeman, and went on in silence, surprised, but quite convinced.

The Imp settled back in the red plush seat, and the train pulled out. It was done! Nevermore should he see the gravel path and the library and the open fire and the stable and his mother! Oh!

The Prodigal Imp

A short, quick sound like a sob that is changed quickly into a cough came from the seat where the Imp sat. It could not have been from him, because he looked around with an over-acted surprise as if he were greatly shocked at such a noise in a public place.

What were they all doing? Had they found him out? Were they crying? Was Gertrude wishing she had bought ice-cream when the man came by with the bell and the white apron?

Was Uncle Stanley regretting his loud and untimely laughter when the Imp climbed upon the edge of the bath-tub to illustrate the proper method of balancing on a rope, and fell suddenly and splashily in? That had been a very mortifying occasion.

Was Katy Nolan wishing she had been a little kinder in the matter of a few paltry sugared cakes that a person might want when he had been running errands all the morning?

Was James O'Connor wishing he had been a little more polite, even if the horse had been watered when he didn't know it? What was a pail of water more or less? And the horse was very grateful for it!

The Prodigal Imp

And his mother—was she thinking of her little boy?—but again came that strange noise, and the Imp sat very straight and turned his attention to the men around him. They were reading papers. Men always did that, it seemed. A paper-boy came through the train, and the Imp touched his arm softly. The boy turned.

“I’ll take a paper, if you please,” said the Imp.

“What d’ye want?” said the boy.

“Just a paper, thank you,” said the Imp, blushing, because he felt that people were looking at him.

“But what paper?” persisted the boy, half laughing, half puzzled.

“Oh, any one you like,” said the Imp, politely.

The boy pulled out one, and said “Three cents, mister!” in a businesslike way that delighted the Imp beyond measure. He gave the boy a dime and a nickel, in a large, easy way, and concealed his surprise at the handful of pennies handed back to him.

Then he glanced around, and coughing importantly, after the fashion of his Uncle Stanley when he read anything aloud from a magazine, opened the paper. He had not read very much

The Prodigal Imp

recently, except in an unpleasant blue book with words in columns and very poor pictures of common objects which one hardly cares to see in type every day. He preferred to have others read to him, on the whole. One gets through more books in a shorter time. But he had seen papers read, and holding it before him, he glanced intelligently up and down the columns, coughing at intervals.

He felt very grown up and very busy. No wonder men liked to read papers, they were so big and crisp, and smelled so good. One regretted the lack of pictures, but then, for three cents one could hardly expect so fine a volume as the "Blue Fairy Book," for instance.

"Any news to-day?" said the man who sat behind him, leaning over the back of the seat.

The Imp turned politely around.

"I—I haven't got very far," he said, and then, in a burst of confidence: "I don't read very much except in the First Reader, you see. Gertrude mostly reads to me. She reads very well."

"Is Gertrude your sister?" asked the man, looking curiously at the mite in corduroy and a polo-cap.

The Prodigal Imp

"Gertrude," said the Imp, with decision, "is my aunt, but I *never* call her that."

"No? Why not?" said the man.

"Because she's too young," answered the Imp, a flash coming into his eye. "She's only fifteen, and I won't call a girl that's only fifteen *Aunt* Gertrude. She's very angry that I won't. She says I ought to be made to. So Uncle Stanley says that *he'll* call her Aunt Gertrude; *he'd* just as soon. So one day they all called her Aunt Gertrude—all but me. She was very angry."

The man laughed very hard. "And why are you running away?" said he.

"Because they won't let me have guinea-pigs," said the Imp simply. It did not seem at all strange that the man should know he was running away; he only wondered that everybody hadn't noticed it.

"O-oh!" said the man. "To New York?"

"Yes, sir," replied the Imp. "I thought it was a good place."

Then, as there was no reply, he looked anxiously at his companion. "Isn't it?" he inquired.

The man looked out of the window thoughtfully. "Well, that depends," said he slowly,

The Prodigal Imp

“on what you want. You see, they may keep you at the station and carry you to the—the—the place where they take people who are all alone with no—no aunts or anything with them, you know; and they keep you till you’re identified, and it’s very hot and stuffy, and then they send you home with a policeman, and he’s very cross at having to take you—and that’s all.”

The Imp gasped. “But I’m going to run away!” he said excitedly. “I’m going to—to earn a great deal of money!”

“Ah?” said the man, politely. “By selling papers? That’s what little boys do in New York. They rarely do anything else.”

“Why?” whispered the Imp, terrified at the solemn manner of the man. “Why?”

“It’s about all they can do,” said the man.

The Imp leaned back in his seat. He did not wish to sell papers. The paper-boys he had seen were very ragged and dirty, and ate queer things.

“Now, if you cared to,” said the man, still looking out of the window, “you could get out here at the next station, and in a few minutes there’d be a train home, and you could take it.

The Prodigal Imp

It comes very soon, and you'd be back before they knew you had gone. Of course, you needn't unless you care to. If you'd rather sell papers——”

“Oh, no!” said the Imp, decidedly.

“Then, there's your mother,” said the man, “she will probably miss you at first, and she'll feel very bad—for a while. She'll miss you at night——” But the Imp heard no more.

He buried his face in his polo-cap and sobbed with remorse and loneliness.

“Oh, dear! Oh, dear!” he moaned. “I'll miss her, too! I'll miss her awfully bad!”

“Well,” said the man, “here's the station!”

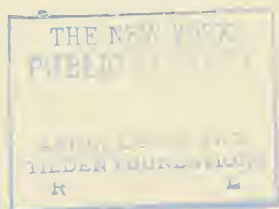
And down the car steps stumbled Perry Scott Stafford, with very red eyes and a very damp cap. The man waved his hand out of the window, and the Imp called huskily after him,

“Good-by! But I shan't keep kittens—I shan't!” He did not hear the man's reply, which was somewhat confused.

And the train, when it came, went all too slowly for Perry Scott Stafford, who was frightened at his daring and remorseful at his bad temper, and filled with a great and powerful desire to see his



He wept quietly on her white lawn shoulder.



The Prodigal Imp

mother—so much so that he wept at intervals, and feeling, as he did, very pious, recited softly, “Little Imps must brush their teeth,” under the impression that he was saying his prayers! And when he got off at the station he fled to his home, with a love for it that he had never felt before.

He stumbled up the gravel path and noted with amazement that all was as he had left it. The house looked the same, and the croquet-ground and the stables. Even the hammock held the same person whose laugh had made him hurry along to the train on that dreadful occasion that somehow seemed so long ago!

He skirted the house and went in at the back door. His mother was sewing in the shade on the side porch. She looked very cool and white and comfortable, and she was singing a little tune just as contentedly as if she had not come near losing her only son.

His tears flowed afresh, and he jumped into her arms, explaining his late revengeful intentions so confusedly that she thought he had been dreaming, and cuddled him softly till his penitence grew clearer, and then she looked grave, and explained to him in heart-rending words how mothers

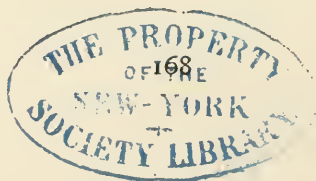
The Prodigal Imp

felt when their boys cared so little for them as to be willing to run away.

He wept quietly on her white lawn shoulder, wiping his eyes at intervals on the lace of her tie, and leaving grimy smudges on her sleeve, while she kissed his hot little head and sang him to sleep.

As he drifted off he seemed to hear a familiar voice, that, indeed, of James O'Connor, describing to Katy Nolan the appearance of what he called "a rale foine collie pup as iver was, that Misther Stanley had talk about buyin' and l'avin' here whin he wint back to the city."

It was too good to be true, and it may have been a dream : the Imp was almost sure it was. And yet it might be true, and if it were, how unjustly he had blamed his Uncle Stanley ! And thinking how polite he would be to grown people, and how kind to the collie pup—*if it were true*—the Imp fell fast asleep.



JAN 3 - 1941

